

Identically Different

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Identically Different

by [Mr Comatose \(PotterWhoLockLin\)](#)

Summary

Post 'The Wrath of the Lamb', Will Graham is found washed up unconscious on a nearby beach, after being presumed dead. Hannibal Lecter, whom he pulled into the water, is also presumed dead.

But when Will is finally discharged from hospital and visits his old home in Wolftap, both he and the FBI will realise that things are not all as they seem...

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"Can I ask you just one question, Will?"

"Sure," he says groggily, feeling himself begin to slip away again.

She leans forward a little. Will knows that he can trust her with his life.

"Did you...love Hannibal back?"

Presumed Dead

Chapter Summary

In which Will wakes up in hospital, Alana attempts not to murder Jack Crawford, and Will discovers a nasty surprise waiting in Wolftrap, Virginia.

Guilt burrows like a worm through Jack Crawford's gut as he stares at the limp body of Dolarhyde. It's not an unfamiliar feeling - quite the opposite, in fact. It became an almost daily occurrence in his life after pulling Will Graham back into the field.

He sighs and forces his eyes away from the Dragon, skirting them up towards the edge of the bluff. Will's blood stains the stone there, as confirmed by forensics; far too much of it to be healthy. Hannibal Lecter's blood gathers there too. There is no trace of them left, aside from Will's gun and Lecter's jacket, but Jack already knows, with a sinking heart, exactly what happened.

He doesn't want to think about it, but he can see it play over and over in his mind, like an old-fashioned film reel behind his eyes. Jack suddenly understands how Will must have felt, gazing at crime scenes.

Jack catches himself, realises that he's been thinking of Will in the past tense again, and tells himself to stop it. There's no evidence yet to prove that Will is anything but alive.

Delaying the inevitable... a voice whispers in his mind. Jack shakes it away. It sounds eerily like Bella.

It's his fault. It was Will's plan, yes, but Jack agreed to it, Jack allowed it to happen, and now it's all backfired. Jack should never have allowed it. He should have listened to Alana.

The only consolation is that Lecter is presumed dead too. Jack can see it all in his mind's eye: the pair of them take Dolarhyde down, Lecter lunges for Will, Will tries to throw him off...and they both tumble over the cliff. It's the only explanation that makes sense to Jack. Will wouldn't have walked away from this. At least, not the Will that Jack knows.

He is startled out of his gruesome reverie by the apparition of Jimmy Price at his elbow. Price looks pale, which is unusual. He is accustomed to murder scenes, even those as bloody as this.

"What?" Jack snaps, guilt gnawing at his very soul. Price's expression doesn't change.

"You might want to come and see this," he says.

"See what?" Jack asks, but Price is already walking towards Jack's car. Reluctantly, Jack follows.

"Where are we going?" he says, slipping behind the wheel. Price is fidgeting nervously in the passenger seat, which is as odd as his paleness. He refuses eye contact. It's almost like having Will back in his car, Jack catches himself thinking, before mentally admonishing himself.

"Follow the road until we hit the bend," Price tells him. His jaw is set.

Jack starts the car and begins driving before he says, "Are you going to tell me what this is about, or not?"

Price shakes his head. "It's, uh, better if you see."

They drive in silence the rest of the way. Jack takes a right at the bend in the road, and the path he follows leads down to the sea. There's a cove here, he remembers - a sandy one. They'd passed by it on the frantic drive up to Will's last recorded location.

Jack had, of course, installed a tracer into Will's phone. He didn't want to have a repeat of Florence. (It had happened anyway, though - Will missing, presumed dead, possibly in Hannibal Lecter's clutches, and Jack left out of the loop.)

Jack drives down towards the cove, both guilt and nerves churning in his stomach. He isn't sure if he's prepared for what Price is taking him to see. He's not even sure if he wants to be. Perhaps horror will banish guilt from his heart, if only for an hour. An hour is all he needs to re-erect his defences.

The sheer cliff faces that frame the cove are gleaming with flashing red and blue lights; an ambulance is parked there, as are two police cars and an unmarked vehicle that Jack is certain belongs to the FBI. People swarm like ants around him as he parks and gets out of the car, beginning to jog across the sand to the centre, leaving Price behind him. He's not sure what he's hoping to find.

What he finds is a body, except it's a wet and bedraggled body, heart still beating, lungs still breathing. It's a pale and too-still lump of a body, and it's bleeding like a burst star all over the sand, but it's alive and it's there and Jack knows it so, so well.

Relief catapults through Jack's veins, even as the paramedics load the body into the ambulance, attaching an oxygen mask to its face, pulling a blanket over its soaking frame. Although fear still beats a warning tattoo in Jack's head, he almost smiles.

It's Will Graham.

This is all your fault, Alana doesn't say, sending a death-glare in Jack's direction. She hopes he gets the message anyway. Her mother once told her that if looks could kill, Alana would be a serial killer. Alana agrees. She feels that, given the time and the resources, she could put the Chesapeake Ripper out of business.

Alana stifles a wry smile at that. She wonders briefly what Hannibal would think.

The noise of the hospital grates on Alana's nerves, but she's developed an immunity against it over time. She turns her thoughts away from fantasies of killing Jack Crawford, and instead pictures Margot and their three-year-old, waiting at home for her. She misses them both terribly. It's just one more thing to blame Jack for.

"This is all your fault," Alana hisses at Jack, deciding against composure. Margot would probably approve anyway, she decides, and it's not like Will would care, even if he were awake.

Jack looks up from where he's been staring morosely at Will's pallid face. "It was Will's idea."

The heart machine beats steadily next to Alana's chair, the only indication, other than the slight rise and fall of his chest, that Will Graham is still alive.

His face is a mess: he's got a knife wound in his cheek and a fractured skull from where, presumably, he hit a rock on the cliff face. His collarbone is patched up too, as is his back, and Alana can't help but notice other scars. A bullet wound, courtesy of Jack. Another bullet wound just a centimetre away (Alana's since learned it was from a woman named Chiyoh). An old stab wound to the shoulder from Will's police force days. And, of course, the centrepiece to the table, the main course of Will's collection: a long and jagged crescent of scar tissue, stretching right across his abdomen in a grisly smile.

It draws the eye like a well-placed vase. Hannibal would have liked it.

Hannibal has probably gloated over it.

Alana scowls at Jack over Will's prone head, forcing her eyes past the ventilator tube taped into his mouth, past the bandages that swathe far too much of his body. "I know it was Will's idea, Jack."

He shrugs. Alana contemplates stabbing him with a scalpel. "He knew the risks."

"So?" says Alana incredulously. "That didn't mean you had to listen to him!"

"We had to catch Dolarhyde," Jack says, sounding as if he's trying to convince himself. "It was the only way."

"There were other ways." Her voice, embarrassingly, nearly trembles with her anger. "There were other ways, Jack, and you know it."

"He presented a compelling argument."

Alana is furious now. She wishes Margot were here to back her up. She wishes that her child were here, too - she wants nothing more than to run her hands through his hair, to inhale his warm, real scent. Instead, she compromises by brushing her hand across Will's thick, untameable locks, which lie limp on his forehead.

"Tell me, Jack," she says quietly, "if Will jumped off a cliff, would you jump too?"

Jack flinches, and Alana, briefly, feels a little guilty at her choice of wording. Then she hardens her heart, and wonders if she could get away with strangling the man with her visitor's lanyard.

She is beyond pissed at Jack, has been ever since he failed his promise not to let Will get too close. She is angry at him, but is, truth be told, angrier at herself. Will is a fighter outnumbered fifty to one, the only one in his corner, and he is tiring, has been tired since the day he was born. Alana should have been there for him. She should have fought harder for him.

Their gazes lose energy and droop like faded flowers to the man lying between them on the hospital bed. Will seems too still like this, too quiet. Alana is used to him twitching, looking away, fidgeting with his glasses - which, rescued from the house on the cliff top, now lie, inert, on the bedside cabinet. The last time Alana saw Will lying this still, he was being treated for encephalitis...something else that she should have noticed.

Alana sighs and pulls her hand away from where it has been drifting, automatically, for Will's arm. The guilt is eating into her heart, her muscles, her bones. In a fruitless effort to cheer herself up, she considers stabbing Jack with the IV pole...until she recalls the Wound Man, something else Hannibal was behind, and stops.

They are quiet for a moment. Jack is probably calculating exactly when he can get Will back in the field. Alana is picturing Margot and their son. They fill her with something akin to peace.

Suddenly, a shrill, rapid beeping cuts through the air, and Alana jerks fully upright in alarm. The heart monitor next to her is registering an rapidly quickening pulse, and when Alana glances back to Will, she realises that he's starting to shake - small, quick tremors, almost invisible to the naked eye.

She looks to Jack in alarm, to find her concern mirrored on his face. They stare down at Will again, who's beginning to shiver more violently, his throat working. Even his eyelids are trembling.

Will's eyes snap open, and Alana feels nearly blinded by the bright blue of his irises. He tries to sit up, his eyes wide and panic-filled, and that's when Alana realises that he's frantically gagging against the ventilator tube in his throat. He reaches up to tear at it, and Alana and Jack both grab his shoulders, pushing him back onto the mattress as a doctor swings through the door.

The doctor takes the situation in in one well-practiced glance, strides over, and pulls the tube out in one swift tug. Will gasps like he's drowning, and Alana feels guilt, guilt, nothing but guilt rip up her lungs and her arteries.

"It's ok, Will, it's ok, it's me, it's Alana," she soothes, realising she sounds as if she's soothing her son after a nightmare.

"Alana?" Will croaks, and, in a movement so unfamiliar to her that it feels alien, he locks eyes with her for what could be the first time ever. And, in this moment, Alana feels like they've finally connected again.

Will feels like shit. Not even regular shit - that would imply that he still felt somewhat whole and unblended. No, Will feels like shit that's been through several digestive systems, a fan, a tub of acid and an atomic bomb. He hasn't felt this bad since the encephalitis.

He sighs and scratches the skin around his IV needle. He's taken it as a good sign that he's allowed to sit up today, even though his back and shoulder scream at any prolonged movement, and smiling makes his face sting like crazy. His cheek, he's been informed, is probably going to scar. Will doesn't mind. He supposes it'll stop people trying to look him in the eye.

Will's actually a bit surprised he's still alive, to tell the truth. He'd thought it was the end when he hurled himself and Hannibal Lecter off a cliff.

Can't live with him, can't live without him. And wasn't that so true?

The doors squeals open, and Jack Crawford enters. Will represses a groan. He's been dreading this discussion since the day he woke up in hospital.

"Hello, Will," Jack says, seeming much more subdued than Will's used to - although he could still be high off the morphine.

"Hi, Jack," he gets out. His throat feels like sandpaper.

Jack gives him a smile and takes a seat by the bed. "You're looking better since I last saw you."

Will snorts derisively, and immediately regrets it as pain shoots through his face. "I look and feel like shit," he informs Jack, who offers a wry grin.

"Falling off a cliff will do that," he says.

"Yeah, it does." Will suppresses a wince. "So, what's it to be?"

"What's what to be?" Jack asks.

Painfully, Will raises a stiff eyebrow. "Don't play dumb, Jack, you know what I mean. Is this a statement or a discussion?"

"Why can't it be both?" Jack asks carefully, shifting in his seat. Will doesn't even need to look to know that Jack is preparing to record the conversation. He can't be bothered to protest.

"Let's just get on with it," Will mutters, tipping his head back to rest against the pillows. He feels exhausted before they've even begun.

Jack shrugs. "Alright," he says, and leans forwards. Will tries not to tense. "Can you tell me what happened on the night Francis Dolarhyde died?"

And so Will tells him. Every last detail.

Almost.

"...but before I could get to my gun, he turned around and stabbed me in the face," Will recites dispassionately, resisting faint amusement at Jack's slightly nauseated expression.

"He threw me through the window. I pulled the knife out of my face...stabbed it into his leg, trying to get him off me. He pulled it out, stabbed me in the chest, just under my collarbone."

Jack winces. Will pauses, not quite sure he wants to relive the next part.

"Go on, Will," Jack prompts. So Will does...with some minor redressing.

"Hannibal jumped on Dolarhyde, and bit his neck. I pulled the knife out of my shoulder, threw it to Hannibal, and he stabbed Dolarhyde in the belly. And then the Dragon died, in glory, just like he'd always wanted."

Will feels a certain amount of guilt, lying about Hannibal like this. Then he remembers Abigail dying under his hands, and the sensation of Hannibal cutting into his head with a cranial saw...and the guilt magically vanishes. What's one more murder to Hannibal's list?

Then Will remembers that Hannibal is probably dead, and he feels abruptly guilty all over again.

"But what about the cliff?" Jack asks. Will takes in a breath.

"Hannibal...attacked me. We'd got to the cliff edge by then, and I realised that..." Will trails off, before saying, "I knew he was going to kill me. So it was together, or not at all."

"Together, or not at all," Jack echoes thoughtfully.

Will is lying so much he half-expects his tongue has turned black. He knows damn well why he threw them both off that cliff, and it wasn't because Hannibal Lecter attacked him.

No, Will leapt off that cliff because he was afraid, if he stayed with Hannibal, of what he might become.

A murderer.

A psychopath.

Or, as Hannibal would put it, an artist.

Will can't deny to himself that he enjoyed the power he felt, slaying the Dragon. But, despite it all, he doesn't want to feel it again. It's like coming off a heroin addiction; it was great during the high, but now Will looks back on it, he recognises it for what it was: ugly.

Killing, he remembers telling Abigail Hobbs, is the ugliest thing in the world.

And it is. But when Hannibal did it, it became beautiful. And now Will finds himself missing Hannibal with a keening ache, more than he ached for him even before Molly and Walter. He doesn't feel that he can go back to them now. He doesn't feel that he knows what he wants anymore.

"Thank you, Will," Jack says now, pulling Will back into the present with a jolt.

"No problem," Will replies quietly, his throat beginning to feel hoarse. It's been like that ever since the damn ventilator tube.

Jack pauses. "Just one more thing..."

Will nearly groans. "Yes?"

"People suspect you," Jack tells him bluntly. Will appreciates bluntness. "You fake-helped Lecter escape. You were there at Dolarhyde's murder. You somehow survived falling off a cliff. People are going to talk. And sooner or later, they're going to start thinking that you and Lecter were working together."

Will bites his lip. Jack sighs.

"You were on a suicide mission, weren't you?" he asks, but it isn't really a question. "You knew from the start that you might not make it back. You told us to ruin your reputation. You threw yourself off that cliff. You knew, didn't you? You knew."

Will leans back, and a tear prickles his eye. It's the first that hasn't been a product of pain since before the fall.

"Yes," he says. "I did."

Jack shakes his head. "Jesus, Will."

When Will doesn't respond, he gets to his feet and pats Will's calf. He's been avoiding Will's shoulder like the plague. "I'll see you soon, alright?" he says. "Alana's coming to visit tomorrow."

Then he leaves, the door squealing shut behind him, and Will's left running his fingers over the scar on his belly, his ears full of the ghost of Hannibal Lecter.

"You are such an idiot," Alana informs Will, the second he opens his eyes.

"Good to see you too," he croaks wryly, emerging from his doze, and Alana pulls him into a gentle hug. She pulls away hurriedly, though, when Will hisses in pain. His stitches have yet to come out, and they still sting like crazy.

Alana sits in the chair by his bed; the same chair she sat in when Will first woke up. Her face is carefully schooled not to betray too much sympathy, and Will appreciates that.

"How are you doing, Will?" she asks. Will shrugs.

"I can't complain. I was expecting to wake up dead, so anything else is bound to be a step up from that."

Alana smiles and Will attempts a chuckle. It fails miserably as the wound in his face decides to make itself known again, pain ripping through his cheek, but he had tried, and that is what matters. Alana shoots him a knowing stare.

"Want me to restart your morphine?"

Will bites his lip. The wounds in his face and back and shoulder are giving him grief, it's true, but he doesn't relish the sensation of being off his face on sedatives. It reminds him of Hannibal.

Everything seems to remind him of Hannibal, these days.

With a sigh, Will manages a weak nod. He's tired, today. Speaking to Jack the day before really took it out of him. "Yeah, ok. Knock yourself out."

Alana expertly fiddles with the taps, and Will tries not to moan with relief as the drugs hit his system. He relaxes back onto the pillows.

"So," he says, voice beginning to slur a little, "any news on Hannibal?"

She shakes her head. "None yet. No sign at all - not even a body."

Will grunts. For some reason he cannot fathom, there's been a niggling thought in the back of his head, ever since he woke up in hospital, that Hannibal is still alive. The feeling hurts him in ways he cannot fully understand.

Only last night, Will woke up in a cold sweat, hair prickling along the back of his neck, knowing, somehow, that he had not been alone in the room. The shadow of a set of antlers had passed across the wall, framed by moonlight that poured in through the sloppily parted curtains.

Will doesn't want to think about what that implies.

The morphine is relaxing him more than he expected. Hazily, changing the subject, Will asks, "How's Margot? Your son?"

Perhaps it's a figment of his hyper-zealous imagination, but Will catches a glimpse of a tear in Alana's eye. "They're fine, Will. More than fine. They're both safe, which is the main thing."

Will laughs a little - as much as his torn cheek allows - and his eyelids slip shut. "Who would have thought it?" he murmurs, the morphine crushing his verbal filter. "Dr. Alana Bloom, respected psychologist, and the seducer of heiress Margot Verger."

She gives him an amused smile. "You seemed to do pretty well yourself."

Will's brain isn't working properly, or maybe the morphine is working rather too well, or maybe even he's having an encephalitis relapse, because nothing else could possibly explain the words that fall out of his mouth next. When Will is more conscious, he is going to regret them severely.

"Yeah," he snorts. "Hannibal Lecter. Now that's what I call a marriage in the making."

Alana frowns. "What?"

She must have meant Molly, of course she meant Molly, but there's nothing stopping Will now. He waves an uncoordinated hand in the air. He's going to blame this heavily on the drugs later. He's also going to try and pretend it never happened.

"Hannibal Lecter was in love with me," he tells Alana matter-of-factly. It sounds a little pathetic to his own ears. "It's weird, and it's twisted, and I'm not even gonna lie, it's kinda hot - but he was in love with me, and it was fucking weird, but I wish...I just wish he'd been different, you know?"

To his horror, Will finds himself getting a little teary-eyed. Alana's expression is now completely unreadable.

"He made me trust him, then he betrayed that trust and framed me. Then I tried to betray him, then I changed my mind, and he thanked me for it with a knife in my gut, with a blade in Abigail's neck. Then he tried to eat me in Florence, then he saved me again, and then, then I finally realise it, that he's in love with me, and that the one person who ever dared to love me was a psychopath."

A slightly hysterical giggle edges up Will's throat. "Don't tell Jack," he adds, somewhat lamely. "Please, Alana - don't tell Jack."

"I won't," she promises, and Will relaxes, a cocoon of morphine enveloping him once more. "Can I ask you just one question, Will?"

"Sure," he says groggily, feeling himself begin to slip away again.

She leans forward a little. Will knows that he can trust her with his life.

"Did you...love Hannibal back?"

Will closes his eyes.

"Yes," he admits, and it's such a relief, such a huge fucking surge of relief to say it out loud that it nearly hurts. "I did. But it wasn't love like you and Margot. It was a horrifying, twisted sort of love - the love that you can't help feeling for the darkest part of your soul. We were like two sides of the same coin. I wanted to hate him, Alana - I wanted it so bad - but I couldn't help but love him."

A sob tears itself up his throat. "Alana - I'm so sorry."

She shushes him then, holding his hand, soothing him in the way that only she could. "It's ok," she reassures him. "It's ok. I'm right here, Will. I'll always be right here. I'm never leaving you undefended again. I'll always believe you, I promise. I'll never do that again. Go to sleep, Will. I'll be right here. Go to sleep."

Will drifts off, suddenly exhausted, and his dreams are haunted by Alana's eyes, and the shadowy antlers of the Ravenstag.

Alana holds Will's hand until he falls asleep, then leaves the room as quietly as possible.

She can't honestly say she isn't surprised. Despite his poise and elegance and beautifully cultivated blank mask, Hannibal Lecter had been an open book when it came to Will Graham. Alana would have been blind to miss the fondness that gleamed in Hannibal's eyes whenever the subject of Will came up.

The golden afternoon light is beginning to fade when she gets into her car. She locks the doors and pulls out her lipstick, retouching her makeup in the reflection of the wing mirror. She's seeing Margot again tonight, and she wants to look nice. She always wants to look nice, for Margot.

Alana isn't planning on telling Jack a word of her and Will's conversation. Even if she wasn't plagued by frequent urges to murder the agent, she figures that Will has enough on his plate without Jack Crawford questioning him on his latent feelings for a serial killer. Besides, it wasn't like she hadn't felt the, too. Hannibal Lecter had a way of getting under people's skin.

She aims a fist at the steering wheel, and is thankful when the airbag doesn't go off.
"Goddamnit, Hannibal!"

Alana takes several deep breaths, and calms herself. She checks the mirror - she hasn't smudged her lipstick. All is well.

Except it isn't, though, and Alana knows that it can never - will never - be all right again.

It's another two and a half months before Will's allowed to leave the hospital, and he spends another two weeks after that in a hotel. He doesn't feel he can go home to Molly just yet. She's supportive - tells him to take all the time he needs. He loves her so much in that moment that it hurts.

There's a hole in Will's chest that he can't quite explain; a hole that has nothing to do with the knife that had been embedded in it. He misses his dogs. In a fit of nostalgia, he misses the days when he could walk into Hannibal's therapy room, sit down, and just share whatever came to mind. The second he catches himself missing this, he throws the TV remote across the room.

He has seen Alana twice since the mortifying episode with the morphine, and neither of them mentioned what he said. Will is unbelievably grateful.

Although he's not quite healed, Will is mending quickly, and he feels better and better as each day passes. He can smile now without too much strain on his cheek. He is able to reach things on high shelves with his right arm without wincing. He can lean his back against chairs without pain.

The only pain Will truly feels is from the hole in his heart.

Although Jack offers him a place back on his team, Will quickly declines. He has no intention of following that path ever again. Jack, he decides later, may also have been high off morphine to make that offer to Will.

Will still owns his cabin in Wolfrap, although he left it shortly after his rejection of Hannibal. He hasn't been back since, and he doesn't want to think about how much dust it must have built up.

It takes Will four attempts to get to Wolfrap. He chickens out twice before even getting to the car rental, and once again after driving ten miles down the highway. He's not sure what keeps pulling him there, but somehow, he feels like it's the only place that will afford him peace.

Attempt number four finds Will standing in the crisp white snow of his yard. It's early evening, and the sky is dulling from gold to a taut slate-grey. He puts his glasses on. He

wants a barrier to numb the memories that are already beginning to wash over him.

He stomps up the stairs with no attempt to stay quiet - there's nothing here to hear him. The wooden porch creaks under his feet. Key in the door - it's stiff, after so long unused - then turn and click. The door, rickety on rusty hinges, swings open.

It feels like a kick in the gut when Will lays his eyes once again on his old living room. It's almost bare, save for a few tattered cardboard boxes, an armchair, his tatty bed in the corner. He couldn't bring himself to sleep in the bed again - not after waking up there after the Florence affair was over. He left it behind, along with the armchair (still smelling faintly of blood and the ridiculously expensive aftershave Hannibal used to wear). He couldn't face the memories.

Come to think of it, he still can't.

Will wonders whether it was such a good idea to come.

He moves softly over the floorboards, his shoes leaving clear footprints in the dust coating the floor. Will reckons it must be at least an inch thick. He hasn't been back to clean in over three years, and it shows.

The air tastes musty, and there's a hint of something else that Will can't quite identify. There's the faintest whiff of citrus, and something coppery that smells a little like blood.

Maybe something died under the floorboards. Will wouldn't be surprised.

He finally gets to the middle of the room. The light seeps in thick bars through the dusty windows and spills out elegantly onto the floor. The dust is caught in a whirlwind, trapped in the hazy confines of the sunlight; bizarrely, it reminds Will of himself. He has never truly been free, even at his happiest - he has been and always will be confined by the terrors of his imagination.

Will lets out a breath he doesn't realise he'd been holding, and relaxes the tiniest bit.

Suddenly, a powerful arm wraps around his chest, another bringing a foul-smelling white pad to his face to clamp over his mouth and nose. Will struggles violently against the person behind him, one hand tugging uselessly against the arm at his chest and the other frantically pulling at the cloth covering his lower face.

His attacker has at least two inches on him and Will's worn shoes only just scrape the ground. He scrabbles his toes desperately across the floorboards, disturbing the dust that spirals up in the disturbance. His glasses fly off as he shakes his head in a hopeless attempt to free himself. Will dimly hears them shatter against the floor. He's struggling and the arms around him are so tight and Will can't breathe, he can't breathe and he feels certain he's going to die.

The darkness at the edges of Will's vision intensifies, and he's gasping now, his limbs going limp, still struggling weakly against his attacker's strong grip. Will gives one last, desperate heave for freedom, but he's falling down an endless tunnel, and his eyes roll back, and -

Will Graham slumps, limp, into the man's arms, his eyes rolling back in his head. The man looks down on him fondly, almost tenderly, and he gently guides Will's head back to rest against his shoulder.

Hannibal Lecter looks up.

His Final Gift

Chapter Summary

In which Jack discovers Will's disappearance, Will debates whether he is finally going insane, and Hannibal Lecter plays a game.

Hannibal Lecter feels a sudden surge of fondness as he gazes down at Will's limp body. He has missed Will; it's something he can easily admit to himself. Hannibal believes firmly that one's true self can only be elevated to its fullest potential when one is capable of accepting their deepest, darkest secrets and urges.

Hannibal understands himself, and Hannibal's potential is magnificent.

He half-carries, half-drags Will out of the door and around the back of the house, the other man's boots leaving drag-marks in the dust and snow. Hannibal doesn't bother to cover them. He is careful to leave Will's shattered glasses lying visibly in the centre of the room, and leaves a small puddle of chloroform on the floorboards. There should be clues enough to guide even Jack Crawford to enlightenment,

The door bangs plaintively against the frame in a sudden squall of wind, but Hannibal doesn't bother to shut it. Instead, he carefully eases Will into the passenger seat of the nondescript car he purloined for this.

Will's head lolls back against the headrest, and Hannibal observes the classic beauty in his features, marred only slightly by his scars: the jagged stab wound in his cheek, courtesy of the Dragon; a slim, neat scar by his left temple, received from that oaf Cordell; and, of course, a brief cut across the forehead, from Hannibal himself. Will looks like an ethereal spirit, the kind found drifting serenely through the paintings of the great masters. Hannibal is always able to appreciate beauty.

He slides into the driver's seat of the car, and shoots a glance at Will, looking so uncharacteristically peaceful, his dark curls bright against the pallor of his skin. In sleep, at rest, Will Graham is a masterpiece.

Typically, Hannibal rules his life with two iron qualities: power and control, the twin sisters of success. Once upon a time, he'd exerted both over Will. But now Will has broken free, and has proven too strong to be confined by these bonds, and Hannibal feels genuine respect for that.

This is why he has decided to stop playing. This is why he starts the car. And this is why - finally, inevitably, reverently - Hannibal Lecter prepares to give his final gift to Will.

Alana is fretting. She holds a wineglass tensely in her hand, rolling the stem between her fingers. She flexes, slightly, almost ready to break the fragile glass, and -

"Probably a bad idea," Margot murmurs, gently pulling the glass from her fingers. "What's troubling you?"

Alana sighs in defeat. She can never hide her thoughts from Margot. "It's just...Will was supposed to call over two hours ago, to tell me he got back alright but he's not answering his phone. He was visiting Wolftrap today."

Margot places a soft kiss against Alana's neck. It's not a seduction, nor an enticement - it's merely a reassurance, once that Alana desperately needs. "Maybe he forgot."

"But it's so unlike him," Alana says, frowning. "I mean, not anymore. He always remembers to call these days."

The candles are burning softly in the hearth, in place of a fire. It's cold outside, but in here Alana and Margot have each other for warmth. Alana is thankful for it.

And Margot - her beautiful, gorgeous, exquisite wife - takes Alana's hand in hers. They fit perfectly together.

"Maybe you should call someone," she says, and Alana knows all too well who that someone is.

"I should," Alana admits. "Just - just in case. It's probably nothing."

"Of course," Margot reassures her, gently kissing her shoulder.

Alana pulls out her phone. She hopes Will just fell asleep, or forgot to charge his phone, and he'll ring her any moment now, apologetic, bashful.

She presses in the number without thinking. The phone rings only for a moment before her call is picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jack," she says.

Will wakes groggily, his limbs feeling heavy as lead. Wherever he's sitting seems to be swaying rhythmically, and for a moment he wonders if he's back in the icy-cold embrace of the water at the bottom of the cliff, clutching the Chesapeake Ripper in his arms. He can't feel his fingers.

It takes all his effort to crack his eyes open with a quiet groan, and he stares blearily ahead, trying to make sense of the fuzzy images. He's not wearing his glasses, but he doesn't have the faintest idea how he lost them in the first place, or how he even ended up here. Everything is a blur.

He swallows, and his vision sharpens, and Will recognises that he's in a car. Memories pierce his brain and he winces, suddenly recalling the fight in Wolftrap. It's dark now, early evening, and Will knows that they must be miles by now.

There is a quiet, discreet cough next to him, and Will freezes. Terrified of what he might see, he inches his eyes left, dragging them to the person in the driver's seat. His mouth is dry. Fear swamps him. He finally turns his head enough to face the driver and stops abruptly.

"Hello, Will," says Hannibal Lecter.

He has a smile on his face, directed at Will; that stupid, stupid, fond smile, the smile that he uses whenever Will's done something particularly clever or pleasing. The smile that makes Will feel humiliatingly like a well-trained dog.

Will lets out his breath in a sigh, easing his head back against the headrest. He looks ahead at the dark road ahead of them, floodlit by brilliant headlights.

"Hannibal," he says, like an acknowledgement. He's not quite sure what to think. "I thought you were dead."

Relief curdles in his gut, but Will's desperate for some kind of feeling, so he clings to it desperately, until it is swallowed by annoyance.

Hannibal drives serenely onwards. Even the way he drives is elegant. "Thankfully, I am not. It is good to see you, Will."

"You too," Will mutters, and Hannibal gives another satisfied smile.

Will doesn't quite feel connected to the world. Hannibal's presence next to him is so real, so solid, that it almost overwhelms him. It makes him shiver.

"How did you survive?" he asks quietly, not expecting an answer. Somewhat surprisingly, he gets one.

"My wounds were not so severe as yours," Hannibal explains conversationally, as if they were discussing wine over dinner. "You took the brunt of the impact of the rocks with your back. When we reached the bottom, I was relatively unharmed, although you had fractured your skull at some point on the journey down."

The streetlights make Hannibal look otherworldly as he speaks. Will is transfixed, and he doesn't quite trust himself to speak. Against his better judgment, he contemplates simply running away with the doctor, away from the FBI, away from this life, away from everyone they would leave behind.

Maybe they still can. That is, if Hannibal doesn't plan on killing him first.

"I swam along the current with you until we reached a small bay a mile down from my house. The route was familiar to me. I pulled you up onto the sand and then made my escape. The sea covered my footprints."

Will takes a moment to consider Hannibal's motives for saving him. A part of him hopes it is because Hannibal sees him as an asset. Another part knows it is because Hannibal enjoys the power he exerts over Will. And yet another part - a deeper, darker part - whispers a poisonous tale of love into his ears.

Will isn't sure which option scares him more. He isn't sure which option excited him more, either.

There is a pause, during which Will settles into his seat a little more, and Hannibal's eyes dart over to examine him.

"Your face has healed well," Hannibal observes. "The scarring, I see, was minimal. Your doctors did a good job."

Will reaches up, a little self-consciously, with his right hand to touch his cheek. He halts abruptly, however, when his hand is pulled up short with a clink. He looks down; his right hand is handcuffed to the car door.

"What's with this?" Will demands, tugging fruitlessly at the cuffs. "What was the point of chloroform, anyway? All you had to do was ask, Hannibal. You know I would have come with you. You only had to ask."

Hannibal looks positively smug by now, but schools his face into an expression of sympathy that Will knows only too well. He swallows a groan. He knows he's not going to get any straight answers out of Hannibal for the time being.

"I'm sorry, Will," Hannibal says, "but it was necessary."

"Oh, really?" Will makes no attempt to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

"Yes. This whole charade must paint you as the unwilling victim. How better to do that than to make it real?"

"The unwilling - what?"

"It is possible that the less you know, the better, Will. This is being done for your benefit, after all."

"For my benefit -" Will actually has to take a moment to let the words sink in. "So how exactly is drugging me and chaining me to your car going to help me?"

There's that smile again, and frustration bubbles in Will. Hannibal is enjoying this, and he's not even attempting to hide it. He's toying with Will.

"It will become clear soon, my dear Will. Everything does eventually, in that beautiful mind of yours." Hannibal's hands shift a little on the steering wheel, and he stares calmly ahead at the never-ending strip of road. "Relax, Will. You worry too much. This journey serves a purpose far greater than you imagine."

Will doesn't even need to ask, at this point. He just cocks his head inquisitively, like one of his dogs, and Hannibal answers.

"Soon, I promise, you will understand." Hannibal's eyes gleam, and Will feels suddenly a little cold, despite still wearing his jacket. "This is my final gift to you, Will."

Alana's phone call takes Jack by surprise, it's true, but he still feels relatively confident that Will is fine. Most likely he forgot, or fell asleep before he could call. It's happened before, after all.

He pulls up the car outside Will's hotel - the same one Will has been staying at for the past two weeks. It's not something Jack would have picked - too cold and drab for his tastes - but he knows Will has always preferred the simpler aspects of life.

Jack ponders this phrase as he enters the lobby. The simplest aspect of life, he supposes, must be the act of living itself. It's funny, really, how something so simple can be so hard. How something so easy can hurt so much.

The receptionist is bored. She has blonde hair and is painting her nails a bright, bubblegum pink, a small crease marring the acre of skin between her perfectly waxed eyebrows. She looks up dully as Jack approaches the desk.

"Can I help you?" she recites in a practiced monotone, still somehow managing to continue painting her nails. Jack is almost impressed.

"I'm looking for a friend," he says. "Has Will Graham returned to his room today?"

Looking irritated, she abandons her nails in order to drill the commands into her computer. "No, sir," she tells him. "Mr. Graham's door hasn't been unlocked since ten-thirty this morning."

Jack feels dread dig into his stomach, and guilt swamps him yet again. He wills his body to calm down as his adrenaline level begins to spike.

"Thank you," he says to the receptionist, already turning away.

"No problem," she replies, resuming her nail-painting.

Jack wishes, not even close to the first time, that Beverly Katz was still alive. She knew Will so well. She could probably find him in a heartbeat. Not to mention that Jack has to go to Wolftrap, and he wishes he didn't have to go alone.

The snow is thick underfoot when Jack finally arrives outside Will's cabin in Wolftrap, Virginia. It has always been a desolate sort of place, but these days it looks sad and bedraggled; even pathetic. A nasty little voice in Jack's head points out that Will Graham and his house are just alike.

The first thing that Jack notices is Will's hire car, parked just in front of the porch. The engine and lights are off, and when Jack places an ungloved hand on the hood, it's cold to the touch. If Will's still here, then he hasn't touched it in hours.

The second thing he notices is that the front door is banging against the frame.

Jack's instantly on edge.

He pulls his gun from its holster and flicks on his flashlight, making his way cautiously up the steps. He's careful to avoid stepping in the clear footprints that are marked in both the snow and dust. He pushes through the door.

The third thing Jack notices is the cracked pair of glasses lying abandoned on the floor.

He fumbles for his phone. He doesn't bother checking for intruders; he knows they're long gone. Fear drops into his stomach like lead.

Jimmy Price answers the call. His voice is blurred with irritation.

"Hello?"

"I need forensics down here in Wolftrap, stat. Get the team on the case."

"Why, what happened?"

Jack feels pure dread seal itself in his heart and bury itself there. It's trapped so deep he knows he'll need a shovel to dig it out.

"Will Graham is missing."

Jack paces feverishly for over an hour while he waits for backup to arrive. He feels like berating Will for choosing such a remote location for his hideaway.

To pass the time, he talks to himself, talks to the ghosts of Will that roam this sad excuse for a home. He calls Alana. She is duly horrified. He alerts Molly. She is duly terrified. He tries to think of someone else to call, before realising that the only other person who would care if something happened to Will is a serial killer who Will threw off a cliff over three months ago.

This, to Jack, points to how seriously fucked up Will Graham's life is.

He tells Will this, as he watches the shadow of him bend over a fishing fly. The Will of his memories gives a little laugh, but then Jack realises that all of Will's laughs sound forced. So he stops soon after.

Eventually, the convoy of vehicles march like ants in formation through the woods and fields surrounding Will's cabin, right down to the driveway itself. The forensics team scurry out, eager to preserve the crime-scene while it's still relatively fresh.

Jack dislikes the idea of Will's house being labelled a crime-scene, if only because it makes his guilt rear its head once more.

He waits another hour, tense and on edge. At one point, he almost checks his pockets for aspirin, before he realises who he is acting like, and stops. Will is everywhere in this house, permeating every surface; it's like his ghostly presence is possessing all those who stand in its walls. Jack shivers.

"You ok, Jack?"

It's Jimmy Price, concern marring his features. It's not a good look on him. Jack prefers it when he's being sarcastic.

"Fine," Jack tells him. "What have we got?"

Price gestures for Jack to accompany him, and he does. They duck around bright wreaths of police tape and skirt morbidly cheerful yellow evidence markers, all the way to Will's front door. Brian Zeller is there, impatiently tapping his feet.

"You took your time," he says crossly to Price, who rolls his eyes.

"Who cares?" Price shrugs. "We're onto the good stuff now. Lead the way, hotpants."

They bustle to the porch, where the footprints are, thankfully, still partially visible.

"So Graham drives up the road, stops the car, gets out," Price narrates. "He climbs the porch steps, comes through the door. Doesn't bother to shut it, the lazy bastard. He keeps on walking, right? Stops in the centre of the room, right there."

They've reached the main room, where Will's footprints stop abruptly. Zeller continues.

"Our attacker doesn't come in through the front door; he drives around the back. Must have been a while ago, now - there aren't any tyre tracks to show that he arrived recently. We reckon he's been living upstairs."

"Can we get to the point?" Jack growls impatiently.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry." Price looks almost a little embarrassed. "Ok, so the attacker sneaks up behind Graham - musta been real quiet, these floors creak like hell - then grabs him..."

"...and puts the chloroform to his face - see that puddle over there. And Graham struggles, his glasses fly off, then land right there on the boards. The attacker -"

"- must be pretty tall, at least three inches taller than Graham. See these scuffs in the dust? That's where Graham's toes must have scraped the floor when he was struggling. Anyway -"

"- the attacker waits until Graham's out before pulling him away. Drags him through the dust and round to the back door...mind your step there, Jack...through the snow, and puts him in a car. We know it was the passenger seat -"

"- because of the relation of where the drag marks end and the placement of the wheel indentations. So then the attacker gets in - without bothering to tidy up, mind you - then drives off without a word."

Price stops his verbal tirade in order to get his breath back, but Zeller gallantly steps in to finish it off.

"He must know his way around here pretty well to be able to pull off a stunt like that, Jack. He managed to sneak up behind Graham without making a sound, which ain't easy to do. I know he's been in hospital and all, but Graham's still the twitchiest guy I ever met, hands down. Anyone who could sneak up on him would have to be -"

"You say the attacker was male," Jack interrupts. "Why?"

"Shoe size," Price says smugly, "and height, not to mention strength. Added together, I think it's safe to assume -"

"When you assume, Jimmy, you make an 'ass out of u and me'. You ever hear that expression?"

Price shrugs. "Balance of probability."

Jack resists the urge to sigh. "Stay here. Try to get anything from upstairs - see if the attacker left prints behind. I need to get back to my office."

Price and Zeller nod. Jack turns and strides for the door, collecting members of his team as he goes.

Yes, he thinks: the simplest part of life is living, but it's also the hardest.

Despite the stress of suddenly waking up in a car after being drugged by Hannibal Lecter, the gentle hum of tyres against the road ends up lulling Will into a light doze. He feels far more relaxed than he ought to in Hannibal's company.

Hannibal, meanwhile, drives serenely onwards, making even life on the road look elegant.

He's not wearing one of his usual suits, which even now Will manages to find jarring. Without the usual three-piece, he seems somehow even more powerful; the tightly-cut fabric of his jumper easily accentuates the thick muscle that Will can't believe he never noticed before. When you want to believe hard enough, he supposes, you end up doing so.

They've been driving two hours when Hannibal pulls into a lonely gas station. The night is starting to set in, and it is bitterly cold. The moon hangs fat and full in the star-filled sky.

Hannibal climbs out of the car, and Will winces as the cold air cuts across his face. Temperature change still makes his cheek ache.

"What are you doing?" he asks, his voice sounding a little cracked.

"One moment," Hannibal says, and then he shuts the door.

Will sits still in his own seat for the moment, hampered by the handcuff around his wrist. He debates opening his own door for a moment, then jumps as Hannibal does it for him. The gleam in Hannibal's eyes when he sees Will startle reminds Will of that of a fox.

"Come," Hannibal says, unlocking the handcuff from the door. "It is time we put on a little show."

Will barely has time to relish his taste of freedom before Hannibal clicks the empty cuff over his left wrist, binding his hands together. He is about to protest and ask what Hannibal means by a show, when he suddenly feels the ice-cold butt of a pistol at his temple, and the words die in his mouth.

"This way," Hannibal announces, exerting quiet but firm pressure on the gun, and Will has no choice but to follow.

The gas station is deserted at this hour. Oddly, even the small store inside is empty, despite the lights inside blazing brightly like a lighthouse before a storm. Perhaps the staff are in the back room. Will stumbles a little as they traverse the uneven Tarmac, but Hannibal's tight grip on his collar prevents him from falling.

The choice of a gun is unexpected. Guns are inelegant, distanced - their impersonal death seems almost rude with its bluntness. It's not the sort of weapon Will ever expected Hannibal to use. Hannibal's choice weapons are his scalpel, his hands, and his slick and buttery words.

Will's still pondering this as they near the empty store. It all seems so clumsy for Hannibal. If the doctor wants him dead, then he would have died the second they fell off that cliff. If Hannibal wants him spirited away somewhere, then Will has no doubt that they would have

already arrived. No, if Hannibal Lecter is doing this the hard way, then Will has no doubt that he has some ulterior motive in mind.

This thought is both comforting and terrifying.

Guiding Will past the bright and empty store, Hannibal presses the gun into the back of his head. "Smile, Will," he says.

Will follows his gaze to the security camera fixed to the wall of the building. The red light blinking at them reminds Will a little of a large and ugly beetle.

The second Will locks eyes with the camera, he hears the click of the safety from the gun pressed to his skull. His breath catches. Fear drips into his features. Hannibal wouldn't shoot him. Surely he wouldn't bring Will all this way only to shoot him in the head in the dark. It's not exquisite enough for Hannibal, not as precise. Hannibal wouldn't shoot him, surely...

Hannibal, upon feeling Will freeze in terror, laughs quietly. "Fear not, Will. This is only a precaution. I would not want Uncle Jack to get the wrong idea about our little adventure."

He presses on, and Will, shaking now, stumbles forward on trembling legs.

Sweat begins to gather on Will's skin as he and Hannibal clear the store. He begins to wonder if he was wrong before, about Hannibal not planning to shoot him. He's been wrong before. He hopes, though - more than ever - that for once he is entirely right about Hannibal Lecter.

Around the back of the store is another car, this one a modest dark blue with West Virginia plates. Hannibal opens the passenger door.

"You first," he says, amusement glittering in his eyes.

Will clambers awkwardly in, settling into his seat with a sigh of relief. Clearly, Hannibal has no intentions of killing him just yet.

After attaching Will's handcuffs to the door handle, Hannibal walks round to the driver's side, climbs in and starts the car.

"Where are we going?" Will asks, once he feels he can trust himself to speak again.

Hannibal gives him one of those smiles, sharp as a knife across his face. "You'll find out soon enough."

As they slip once more into the cover of night, Will wonders if he really wants to know.

Back at base, Jack gets his team onto CCTV footage. It's a long shot, but Jack figures that whoever kidnapped Will drove away in a car, and that means that sooner or later, they're going to need to stop for gas.

It's over an hour and a half before Jack gets a result - and he spends that drinking terrible coffee and tensely barking orders. It's one of his trainees, Ardelia Mapp, who finds it.

"Sir, I've got something," she calls. Immediately, she is surrounded by spectators.

"What's this?" Jack asks, squinting at the footage on the screen. The quality is good enough, but he has to peer past the reflection of himself on the screen to see the details.

"Footage from a gas station an two hour's drive from Will Graham's house, sir," she says. "It's from three hours ago."

"Well, come on, then, let's see it," says Jack impatiently, nerves ticking in his skull. Mapp clicks play.

For the first five seconds, the patch of Tarmac outside the gas station remains empty. Jack is about to tell Mapp to fast forward, but the words crumble to ashes in his mouth as the two figures come into view.

The taller person has his face obscured by shadow, but Jack can clearly see the cold glint of the gun barrel that he is pressing into the shorter figure's head. The smaller man in front stumbles more than once, but he doesn't fall, saved by the firm grip the man behind him has on his jacket collar. Jack notices, with a cold rush of unease, the bright flash of metal around the shorter man's wrists.

When the pair reach the middle, they slow, and the revolver guides the man in front's head around, enough to face the camera. The face is contorted with fear.

Ardelia Mapp pauses the feed, zooms in on the face of the man in front.

Jack knows that face.

His mouth is suddenly dry.

"Send a team out there," he orders no one in particular. "Mapp, you keep monitoring footage. I need to make a call."

Hannibal carefully eases the car around a wide-eyed deer as he drives steadily through the night. Will, in the passenger seat, has fallen asleep again. Hannibal is glad. Will Graham has always been far more pliable when relaxed.

The look of fright on Will's face when Hannibal drew the gun on him had been both surprising and gratifying. Perhaps a part - the smallest, most inconsequential part - of him feels a little guilty for unnecessarily scaring Will so badly, but another, stronger part revels in the power he can still exert over the empath. It's crude, but power still excites Hannibal almost as much as control.

In any case, Hannibal understands how power differentiates. He knows that it is not overly difficult to scare someone; it is in fact much harder to have the power to relax them in his presence.

He glances over at the sleeping form in the passenger seat. Will is gorgeous when trusting.

Sticky satisfaction settles in Hannibal's stomach as he admires the man next to him. Will's eyelids flutter as he dreams; no doubt his nightmares still have hold over him, even now. His dark curls are limp over his forehead. Hannibal notices, with a blend of amusement and distaste, that Will is still wearing that ridiculous aftershave, although it is mostly smothered by the pervasive scent of chloroform that still clings to him.

Will shifts and mutters a little, before relaxing once again. A magnificent creature, indeed.

Hannibal considers how simple it would be to kill the man next to him. He could do it kindly, tenderly; a quick snap of the neck, and it would be over. Or perhaps he could be indulgent: Will's blood looks wonderful on his pale skin, and Hannibal has always favoured knives. Or maybe even Hannibal could kill him lovingly, with his hands tight and precious against Will's long, slim neck; he could watch the light leave Will's eyes and soak it up into his own skin.

But no, Hannibal decides, he won't. Will has earned his freedom, and Hannibal intends to give it to him. Will has proved himself worthy of Hannibal's gift.

Even so, he wonders, briefly, what Will would look like dying. He wonders how he would feel. Triumphant? Perhaps. Sorrowful? Definitely. Although he would feel a sudden burst of euphoria, of power, it would soon be weighted with regret. Killing a creature such as Will would be like killing a stag: magnificent, exhilarating...and yet a terrible crime indeed.

What a waste it would be.

Hannibal steers himself and his charge swiftly through the slick black night. Outside the safety of their little island, it is cold and quiet and desolate. Beside him, to his satisfaction, Will sleeps quietly on.

Some people, he knows, believe that the simplest aspect of life is living itself, but Hannibal is not some people. What Hannibal knows beyond doubt is that the simplest aspect of life is not living, but dying.

Hannibal has never been one to take the easy route.

Human Instinct

Chapter Summary

In which Alana forms an alliance, Hannibal terrifies Will, and Ardelia muses on her feelings concerning her ex-teacher.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This is it, Alana decides grimly, staring daggers at the man in front of her. This is the day. She is finally going to straight-up murder Jack Crawford.

What Alana had been expecting as a result of Jack's investigations was perhaps having to gently rebuke Will into remembering to answer his phone. Possibly a roll of her eyes as she learned that Will had adopted another stray without calling to tell her. Worst case, a call from the hospital to say that Will had fallen down a ditch and broken his leg, or something equally as stupid.

She had not, however, prepared herself for a call that arrived at nearly eleven o'clock at night, waking up everyone in the house and scaring the hell out of her and Margot.

"For God's sake," Alana muttered as she slid down the hall to the telephone in her socks, hastily tying the belt on her dressing gown. Her hips hurt, as they often did in the winter. It did not improve her mood. "I keep telling people to call my mobile, but do they listen? Of course not..."

Margot crept up behind her, their son in her arms. He sleepily clutched at his toy rabbit. "Who is it?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Alana replied, resisting the urge to utter loud strings of expletives as her aching hip knocked into the table, because she was a parent now, and swearing was one thing she did not want to pass down to her child.

Besides, she could be a responsible adult. There were many people she could think of who she exceeded in maturity. Will Graham, for one...although, Alana had to concede, there were probably stick insects with more assurance than Will. But she was sure that she beat hundreds of people out there. She had degrees, for God's sake.

The telephone was still ringing shrilly, and it grated on Alana's already frayed nerves. She picked it up, exchanging a glance with Margot. "Hello?"

"Alana," a voice said, and she wanted to groan out loud. She didn't, though, of course.

"Jack," she said instead, "it's eleven o'clock at night."

"I know," he replied, "and I'm sorry. But I followed up your worries on Will, and I stopped by his hotel."

"And?" Alana had a sneaking suspicion that she would soon be feeling uncontrollable murderous urges, all aimed at Jack Crawford.

"He hadn't come back from Wolftrap yet. It was getting late, so I drove out there. He wasn't answering his phone. I've got a team out in his hotel room now, trying to find any leads..."

"Jack." Alana was tired, and impatient, and Margot looked unhappy at this point - and no one made Alana's wife unhappy and lived to tell the tale. "Get to the point. Now."

Jack sighed on the other end of the phone. "I got to Wolftrap. Will's car was there, hadn't been touched for hours. I went inside. Jesus - I'd hoped the whole thing with Will was over with. I'd hoped we could just let him be, with Molly and Walter. But shit happens, I guess - though I swear it only seems to happen to Will."

Dread crept up Alana's spine like liquid oxygen. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear what came next. Right then, all she wanted was to curl up in bed, with her wife and son, and forget about this whole ugly mess.

But she couldn't. Not then.

Jack continued, his voice sounding ragged. "He's been taken, Alana. We found drag marks from his shoes where he was dragged out the door, chloroform on the floorboards, Will's glasses...everything but prints. We found footage from a gas station only ten minutes ago. It's Will alright, but we can't tell who's with him. I'm sorry, Alana. I know you weren't expecting this."

Alana's expression hardened. She might have resented being evicted from her bed so late, but she'd be damned if she would leave a friend out in the cold. She stared grimly at a crack in the plaster just above the phone.

"Give me an hour," she said firmly. "I'm coming in."

And now Alana is drinking truly terrible filter coffee, ruminating on the number of ways she could kill Jack Crawford. She finds it surprisingly therapeutic.

She waits a full ten minutes before Jack comes to meet her at the door, looking surprisingly harassed. She feels more than a little smug at this - everything, everything is all Jack's damn fault, and she's glad he's guilty. It eases some of her own.

"Show me the footage," she orders, the second he appears. His jaw is set into a grim line. Good. It matches hers.

They stride purposefully to Jack's office - a new one, bigger, on the second floor, designed for operations to be carried out, for plans to be hatched. It is not a space for paperwork; Jack has elevated beyond the role of pen-pusher.

"I like the new office," Alana comments, as she waits for the footage to be pulled up by one of Jack's trainees. It's something to say to keep them both occupied. "It's very modern. Big."

"Thanks," Jack replies. He isn't concentrating on the exchange, either. There is a pulse of hot scarlet anxiety running through the room.

The coffee Alana clutches tastes awful, and it isn't improved by cooling. She takes another sip anyway. She cannot stop to think, or she will break like a teacup. She must not allow herself a moment's rest, or she will shatter. She cannot allow that to happen.

"Here," Jack's trainee says, bringing the footage up on the screen.

Alana watches it, her heart tightening. She heard once that stress can kill you, tear your heart in two, and she realises now that they were right. Every moment of this video rips her heart a little further down the middle.

The fumble of Will's shoe on the wet Tarmac, nearly losing his footing. A heartstring snaps.

The knife-bright gleam of metal cuffs around his wrists. One of her arteries rents.

The gun at his head. It looks comically out of place next to Will's curls. Her ventricles shrivel.

The undiluted terror on his face. It looks so wrong. Fear comes so naturally to Will that it hurts to look at it - it's like the fear of a young child. Unpreventable and yet heartbreaking.

Alana's heart breaks at it. It curls up on itself and splits in two and dies in her chest right there and then.

Everything suddenly becomes so very real for her right then.

"Who is it?" she asks. She is proud of how steady her voice sounds.

"We don't know," Jack says. Alana thinks his heart must be made of stone, to speak so calmly, so blandly. "We can't get a good enough glimpse of his face, and he was careful enough not to leave any personal evidence."

Alana wants to scream, suddenly. This is all so surreal. It's all so wrong. These are men and women who have conspired and plotted and hated and whispered about Will, herself

included, and they're all humming around here, acting as if they're all friends now because Will threw a monster off a cliff.

Alana and Margot did that too, once. The only friends it won them besides each other were nightmares and death and the sweet stench of fear.

It took Will's near suicide to convince these people of his innocence. And, worst of all, it took Alana that too. She stinks of guilt. She was meant to be his friend, and she let him down, for what might be the final time.

Her eyes shoot to the side, still uselessly shy of her own failings, and she glimpses Jack's face once more. They're re-watching the footage again, and his face is old. Crumpled. Creased. Pained. It's the old of empires fallen, of kings dethroned. It's the old of battles lost, monuments crumbled, treaties broken. It's the old of suffering

And, suddenly, Alana realises that yes, a heart can be made of stone. But human hearts break and heal and beat again, and that her pain might fade as the ripped ligaments of her heart kiss together again, leaving only thick veins of scar tissue behind. But stone hearts split and shatter, and nothing can mend them once they have been broken.

Jack's heart is made of stone, but once it was whole. And, once upon a time, it was broken.

Alana thinks about this for quite a while. She is numb with hurt. But then Jack catches her eye, and she goes back to drinking bad coffee.

It is probably about one in the morning when Will wakes again. He can't be certain. His watch is missing and he suspects Hannibal removed it; either to prevent him from using it as a tool of escape or to keep it as a memento, Will doesn't know. Both are equally disturbing.

The night surrounding them is blacker than ink, pierced only a little by the headlights. Will's sleep has been muddled with the ghosts of nightmares; he tried to reach out for them, only to find them blurring into one another like chthonic monsters of mythology.

Will hisses as he changes position; sleeping in the car has done him no favours at all. He has a crick in his neck from sleeping with his face against the window.

"You know, I could lend you a coat to sleep on if you like." The voice drifts over to Will like whispers over a lake. He wonders if he isn't still dreaming.

"No thanks," he says automatically, without even processing the question. "I mean - I'm fine without, thank you." He darts a glance over to the driver's seat.

Hannibal seems amused by Will's reply. The corners of his mouth quirk up a little, although he doesn't take his eyes off the road. Will ends up feeling defensive and a little uneasy. Hannibal has always looked at him like prey, or worse, a cut of meat.

Maybe that's what he has planned. Perhaps this whole charade will end in a ritual sacrifice, with Will laid out on a platter as a main course.

He's had dreams about that, actually, although there's no way in hell that he would ever admit that to anybody, especially not the man next to him. In these dreams Will is always eaten alive; Hannibal's head sprouts antlers and Will is laid out full length on his mahogany dining table. His skin is peeled away like the layers of an onion. He always feels like a present being unwrapped.

And finally he's laid bare, and the monster of a man gazes down on him; it reaches in, delicately, tenderly, and plucks out his heart and eats it.

Will often awakens sweating after these dreams, splayed out on his bed with his neck exposed like a lamb to the slaughter.

He plans on never telling Hannibal this, ever.

"I trust you slept well?" asks the man in question, continuing the steady rhythm of driving.

Will considers not answering, still preoccupied with contemplating exactly how Hannibal is planning on cooking him, when he remembers that being rude to the doctor is probably the quickest route to ending up on the dinner table.

So instead he says, "Fine, thanks. Better than expected."

"Good," Hannibal says, offering another pleased quirk of the lips. Will fiddles for a moment with the handcuff around his wrist, trying to work up the courage to ask the next question.

"What happens now?" he asks, and feels proud of himself for not allowing his voice to shake, although he can't quite meet Hannibal's eye when he turns to look at Will. Eyes are too intense, too intimate for Will, even on a good day, which today is definitely not.

Hannibal contemplates this methodically, as he contemplates everything. "A further continuation of the overture is needed, I think, before the opera commences. Jack Crawford should have stumbled across our little duet by now, which means that we shall be able to recommence our dance again shortly."

Will's over-zealous imagination kicks in at that, instantly bringing the cold kiss of the gun against his temple to mind, and he shivers, just a little. He does his best to hide it. He doesn't want Hannibal to sense his weakness, or worse, show him pity.

But apparently Will doesn't hide his fear as well as he hopes, because then Hannibal gives one of those amused little smiles, and says, "Don't look so worried, Will. I have no intention

of harming you. At least," he adds, "as little as is strictly necessary."

Will is, understandably, not overly reassured by this.

Hannibal smiles at him again, but it is more like a baring of teeth, and Will notices with a swallow that his canines are very sharp.

They drive for a while longer. The surrounding landscape has graduated from snow-covered fields to ice-capped trees, and the moon is just visible ahead from inside the car. It looks like a bloated white egg, surrounded by thick silver speckles of stars.

"The moon is full," Hannibal notes as they slide through the night. "A precious night. People used to refer to nights such as these as the time of 'moon madness'."

Will smiles at that. "Hope we don't meet a werewolf," he jokes.

Hannibal's answering smile is more thoughtful. "I hope not indeed," he says, although Will notes uncomfortably how hungry his gaze has become.

Lights appear like Jack O'Lanterns at the far end of the road, and as they draw closer Will realises that they signal the approach of another gas station. Nerves congeal in his gut. He bites his lip and clenches his right fist, twitching a little - an instinctive reaction. He's sure Hannibal must have noticed, but he's grateful the doctor chooses not to comment. He feels anxious enough as it is.

Hannibal pulls into the gas station - like the last one, the lights are all on, but no one is inside - and parks the car. He gets out, opens Will's door for him, unlocks the handcuffs from the handle. It's all incredibly déjà vu. Will gets out the car apprehensively, expecting the cold nudge of the gun against his head.

He's suddenly aware of two things: how much his shoulder and face and back are aching (both from the cold and the strain of being sat in a car for the last seven hours) and secondly of how exposed he feels, in his thin jacket and his worn leather shoes and his fragile psyche.

He stands there by the car on the chilly wet Tarmac, shivering slightly as the wind blows right through his bones. Hannibal locks the car. Will notices that, unlike last time, Hannibal hasn't clicked the empty cuff over his left wrist. His hands are, effectively, free.

Maybe he forgot. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe it's a test of Will's loyalty. Maybe he trusts Will not to do anything stupid. Maybe he knows Will won't do anything stupid.

It's annoying how true the last is, though. Will has no intention of even trying to escape. He is the perfect trusting sacrifice.

Hannibal, although the car is locked now and both his hands are empty, makes no move to produce a gun or move in any direction. He stands perfectly still in the otherwise empty parking lot, his calm face looking as if it were carved from stone.

"So what now?" Will asks, through chattering teeth. It's very cold out here, in the early hours of the morning, with nothing but the wind and the trees and the sky to bear witness.

Hannibal is very close to him when he next speaks, and Will jumps a little at the sound of his voice by his ear. "You see that streetlamp over there?" he asks.

Will sees it. He nods, suddenly terrified.

"Good. I want you to run towards it."

"What?"

Hannibal's eyes gleam predatorily. "It's time for you to escape."

Will is frozen. Why on earth would Hannibal want him to try and escape? Is this some kind of trick? Is someone going to jump out from behind a tree any moment now with a camera and yell, "You've been pranked!"?

Or is Hannibal planning to shoot him in the back, the second Will takes a step?

It's enough to make him pause. The cogs in his brain grind furiously.

Hannibal, though, clearly has no intention of waiting. At Will's hesitation, he puts a hand to the small of Will's back and gives him a push in the direction of the streetlamp.

"Now," he says into Will's ear, and Will obeys.

The second he takes the first step, Will knows he's not going to get far. His legs ache with cramp and his back stings and his shoulder is on fire, and damn him, he's not even sure he wants to get away. Nevertheless, he still decides to make the best of it, and runs.

The Tarmac is slick under his feet and he skids a little, before he rights himself and keeps on running. His heart is pounding now, the fear of the chase kicking a prey-like instinct into motion, the same instinct that has kept animals like him alive for thousands of years.

Ragged breaths tear through his lungs as he reaches the slippery grass verge that leads to the streetlamp that Hannibal pointed out. Will feels blind, abject terror push him on as he bolts up the slope.

And, in that moment, he knows that he doesn't want to be caught. He feels alive, more so than he has since killing the Dragon. This is a moment of perfect clarity. This is the moment where Will understands who Hannibal Lecter truly is.

This is the moment where Will understands that he must run or die.

He approaches the streetlamp with no intention of stopping, careening frantically forwards towards the bright pool of light with a racing heart and fright burning in his lungs. He has no clue where he's going or how he'll get away, all he knows is that he must keep running, keep grinding out the century-old pattern of feet-against-dirt, heart-in-the-mouth, hand-round-the-throat sprint.

And then out of nowhere Will hears footsteps behind him, and before he knows what's happening, Hannibal Lecter tackles him to the ground.

Will gasps for air, gagging against the fresh earth with the wind knocked out of him. Hannibal has a knee in the small of his back and a muscular forearm between his shoulder blades; Will can feel his hot breath against the back of his neck. He can't do much more than struggle weakly. It's over. Hannibal's won. This race was rigged from the start.

"Thank you, Will," Hannibal pants into Will's ear, so close that it makes Will shiver. "Exactly as I asked. Now if you could do me one more favour..."

The familiar muzzle of the gun nudges his head around, and, sure enough, Will comes face to face once again with the blinking red light of a CCTV camera.

Will is about to demand what the point of the exercise was, when suddenly Hannibal gets to his feet, grasping the collar of Will's coat again and replacing the gun at his temple. He hauls Will upright easily - Will's lost a lot of weight since he woke up in hospital, and he's always been on the lean side - and guides him around the back of the building to yet another car, this one painted an ambiguous dark gray.

He opens the passenger door and gestures politely for Will to climb in. Will, ever-gracious to his host, does so. Hannibal locks the trailing end of the handcuffs to the car door, goes round to the driver's seat, starts the car. They pull out into the road.

Hannibal's expression is somewhat akin to the cat who got the cream. He glances once, smugly, at Will, before returning his eyes to the road. He does not once seem tired, despite having been driving for over seven hours now. Not a single hair is out of place; every inch of him is immaculate to a fault.

Will's expression could be more aptly described as shell-shocked. He isn't quite sure what just happened. Were it not for the different interior, he might even be wondering if they had changed cars at all, if the exchange in the gas station was nothing more than a chloroform-induced hallucination.

He catches sight of himself in the wing mirror. Unlike Hannibal, he is a mess, both emotionally and physically. His dark curls are all over the place; his face is pale and there is a smear of mud under his jaw. Will surreptitiously attempts to rub it off (he notices Hannibal smile a little at that). There is a leaf in his hair, which he picks out.

Hannibal's earlier comment of 'moon madness' comes to mind. Will thinks of the night he has had, catches himself stifling a slightly hysterical laugh.

Moon madness, indeed.

Ardelia Mapp, like every other trainee at Quantico, has heard of the legend Will Graham. She's even had classes with him - something that, in the past, people would have given their right arms for. His method of thinking is unparalleled. His instincts are far superior. His success rate is almost one hundred percent.

Ardelia is convinced that he is a psychopath.

Oh, come on. Her friend Clarice was a psychology major, for God's sake. And even if she wasn't and even though Ardelia majored in law, she knows enough about psychopaths to recognise one when she sees it.

Besides, his lectures - despite being famed as "the best in Quantico" - were undeniably creepy as hell. It was all, "get inside the killer's mind" and "everyone has thought about killing someone". Bullshit. The closest Ardelia ever came to murder was the time she put Lego bricks down on her brother's floor in revenge for stealing the last doughnut.

Also, she might also still be a bit resentful for the time Mr. Graham embarrassed her in front of the whole class.

In retrospect, she probably should have listened to the veterans of Mr. Graham's classes when they told her to not, under any circumstances, ask the teacher questions while the class was filing in or out. It was just a bad idea. No, seriously, Ardelia, don't.

She decided they were over-exaggerating, which had the unfortunate effect of making her want to try it.

Ardelia had been raised to be helpful, which was an excellent trait in matters not concerning her teacher. So when she saw Mr. Graham talking (awkwardly) with someone she assumed was his partner, decided to give him a little nudge.

Look, it was nearly Valentine's Day, ok? She figured that Mr. Graham could do with all the help he could get.

In her defence, Mr. Graham and Dr. Lecter had been all but holding hands. They were laughing at a joke Dr. Lecter had made. Laughing! Ardelia had wondered previously if Mr. Graham was even capable of smiling. She watched him actually make eye contact with Dr. Lecter, something she had never seen him do with anyone, not even Jack Crawford.

It was unsurprising, therefore (at least to her mind), that Ardelia came to the conclusion that Will and Hannibal were desperately in love.

In a blind fit of spontaneity, Ardelia made cupcakes. Pink frosting, sprinkles, "BE MINE", the works. She did this for all her friends, anyway, so why not help her teacher out?

Clarice begged her not to. She prostrated herself at Ardelia's feet in a vain attempt to preserve her friend's dignity. She even, that morning, tied Ardelia to her dorm bed as a last resort. Ardelia escaped easily, of course. She had always been better at knots than Clarice; she had been a Girl Scout, after all.

On the 13th of February, Ardelia went to Mr. Graham's lecture at ten in the morning. It was packed, as usual. Despite his extreme antisocial tendencies, Will Graham was still an incredible profiler, and wisdom from him was like ambrosia from the gods to the students at Quantico.

His lecture that day was about the Chesapeake Ripper, the case that everyone knew Jack Crawford had him working on. Unusually, Ardelia wasn't paying too much attention to the lesson. She was too preoccupied deciding exactly how she would carry out her plan.

Eleven o'clock came far too soon, and suddenly everyone was getting up to leave. It was now or never.

Ardelia shoved her way to the front of the room, where Mr. Graham was packing his books away, studiously avoiding all eye contact. She pushed the tin of cupcakes into his hands. The other students paused, filled with admiration, amusement, and horror. Was Ardelia actually going through with her crazy plan?

Yes, Ardelia was. She pressed gamely on, despite Mr. Graham's dumbfounded expression as he considered the contents of the tin.

"Well, you see, Mr. Graham," she said, and distantly she heard Clarice groan by the door. "It's Valentine's Day tomorrow..."

Someone snickered in the frozen crowd and hastily covered it with a cough. No one moved. None of them wanted to miss this.

Ardelia continued. "And I thought you might appreciate some help."

"Help?" Mr. Graham croaked, looking as if he wished the ground would swallow him whole.

"Yes," Ardelia said, feeling uncharacteristically satisfied by producing such a reaction from their usually emotionless teacher. "With talking to your crush and all. It's traditional."

Mr. Graham's normally pale cheeks looked a little flushed. His eyes darted around the room, never making eye contact, looking as if he would dearly love to run away. "Crush?" he repeated nervously.

"Well, you know," said Ardelia, "your crush. Dr. Lecter."

There was a slight pause as the rest of the class actually absorbed this information. Then, filled with a slightly stupefied horror, the nervous giggles broke out.

Mr. Graham looked mortified. He awkwardly adjusted his glasses, fiddled with his bag strap, anything to avoid looking in his students' direction. Eventually, his gaze settled about a foot to the right of Ardelia's head.

"I'm afraid you miscalculated, Miss Mapp," he said, and his voice suddenly sounded about twenty degrees colder. "I'll thank you not to make assumptions in the future. Now, excuse me, I have a meeting to go to."

And, ducking his head down, Mr. Graham pushed hurriedly out of the room as laughter erupted around the room, all of it aimed at Ardelia.

She never really forgot that, which was very much out of character, since Ardelia has never really been one for holding grudges.

Shortly after that, Will Graham's lectures were cancelled after he had what was rumoured to be a nervous breakdown. (Ardelia was somehow unsurprised by this).

Then he was arrested as the copycat killer. (Ardelia was horrified to learn that she had been taught by a serial killer. But at the same time, it earned some serious street-cred. "Oh, so you've got full marks? Well, I was taught by Will Graham, bitch.")

Then he was revealed to be innocent. (Ardelia was a little disappointed and more than a little surprised.)

Then he was brutally gutted by Hannibal Lecter. (Ok, now that one was a complete surprise.)

Then Hannibal Lecter turned out to be the Chesapeake Ripper. (Completely shocking - who would have suspected that the charming, competent doctor was secretly a mass-murderer?)

Then Will Graham retired. (No surprises there.)

Then Jack Crawford brought him back to work the Tooth Fairy case. (What on earth was Crawford thinking?)

Then both he and Lecter died killing Francis Dolarhyde and getting thrown off a cliff. (Ardelia had decided, at this point, that nothing could shock her any more.)

Then Graham turned out to be alive, and was promptly kidnapped. (Ardelia had to confess that she truly did not see that one coming).

The thing is, after all the twists and turns that Ardelia has had to put up with, training at Quantico, she has come to the inevitable conclusion (as have over 40% of her fellow trainees) that Will Graham is two things. Firstly, that he is a psychopath, and secondly, that he is in love with Hannibal Lecter.

Why else would Lecter have let him live? Why else would Graham (in Ardelia's mind) have protected Lecter by pretending not to know who the Ripper was? Why else would Graham not have taken the chance to kill Lecter?

But Jack Crawford trusts him, and Crawford is her boss. So Ardelia keeps her head down and works on finding CCTV footage.

Still, she suspects that Graham is not as innocent as he appears. If she had her way, she would have him arrested on suspicion of assisting Hannibal Lecter in his escape. And, frankly, she's not too convinced that the kidnapping is real, either.

Searching for footage is mind-numbingly dull. Unfortunately, Ardelia happens to have a knack for it, and so this is usually where she ends up when Crawford calls her to his office:

combing through hour upon hour of extensive views of walls. It's at times like these when she regrets not becoming a lawyer.

She chooses a new set of footage and settles down to review it. Blank. Blank. Wait, is that - nope, it's a pigeon. Blank. Blank. Blank.

Suddenly, she sees a flash of black and pauses, rewinds, slows it down. The time stamp on it tells her it occurred a little over an hour ago. She knows she's lucky to have found it so soon after the incident.

Ardelia settles down to watch it before she calls Crawford over. She wants to be certain she's found the right clip.

In slow motion on screen, a figure in a dark jacket runs through the shadows on the left-hand side of the screen and scrambles up the grassy slope there. It reaches the centre - where there is a bright pool of light, clearly given off by some sort of streetlight - just as another figure barrels in after it from the left.

The figure on the left tackles the person in front to the ground, directly under the lamp, kneels on their back and puts a gun to their head. Ardelia can't quite see the face of the person on top, but when the man pinned to the ground slowly turns his head to face the camera, she knows who it is, even without sharpening the image.

The fear and pain on his face is unmistakable.

The person on top - Will Graham's kidnapper, she supposes - gets to their feet and pulls Graham upright easily by his collar. The kidnapper, gun pressed to Graham's temple, marches him forward, out of the light, and off the side of the screen. She pauses the footage, rewinds again.

Ardelia sits back for a moment, wondering.

Despite her reservations against her previous teacher, an instinct to protect her fellow human raises its head. Will Graham may be a psychopath, and he may be just a little bit in love with Hannibal Lecter (and she is adamant that nothing will change her mind about this), but he is still human, still theoretically innocent, and, right now, he has been kidnapped and he is afraid.

Ardelia feels an unexpected surge of pity swell within her.

But even as she calls for Crawford to come and view the footage (followed by Dr. Bloom, Clarice's hero), she has the sudden, weird sensation that she recognises the person who tackled Will Graham.

It's probably nothing.

Ardelia returns to her CCTV and pretends that it never happened.

Chapter End Notes

Hello!

Sorry this chapter's a little late (went on holiday), but it's been fun to write and I'm excited for you all to read it.

This wasn't actually meant to be this long, but now I've started I don't seem to want to stop. So I'd say you've got at least three more chapters left before I'm finished.

Hope you enjoy!

A Consequence of Fear

Chapter Summary

In which Margot Verger considers her connections to Alana and Will, Hannibal does the unexpected, and Jack Crawford receives an unfortunate message.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Margot Verger has never cared overly much for Will Graham. In fact, before she met Alana Bloom, she could safely say that she had never cared overly much for anything other than her beloved horses. Now, of course, she has a wife and a son. She plays poker on Saturday evenings with a group of other women. They have a dog. A spaniel, actually. They have a set of curtains in their living room from a garage sale. She has friends now - friends! - and to her utter amazement she actually enjoys their company.

It's safe to say that Margot Verger has changed.

If she wakes up in the night now it's because Alana is kissing her or her son is restless, not because her abusive brother is jamming a lit cigarette end into the meat of her thigh. If she ends up wearing a cast it's because she slipped in the bathroom, not because Mason held her down until she cried and snapped her bones for fun. If she stops suddenly in the hallway, heart pounding and throat closing, she's met with soft hands and softer words, rather than bitter black curses and a slap.

Margot sometimes looks in the mirror and doesn't recognise the woman staring back at her. For one thing, there are no bruises or black eyes, no slings or scarves artfully wound just so to avoid showing tacky scrapes or even teeth marks. Physically, though, it's still her: same long hair, same flawless skin, same nose, same mouth, same eyes.

Except they're not the same eyes; not at all. Her eyes - though typically pretty and perfectly made up - had been empty. Devoid of all emotion other than a pathetic subservience directed at her brother. Lifeless. But now...they sparkle.

Now...Margot looks alive.

But Will, though...sometimes, Margot wonders if Will was ever alive to begin with, even before Hannibal Lecter got his hooks into him. She has no prior experience, of course...but as long as she's known him, Will Graham has seemed so serious, so visibly wounded that she can't help but wonder if he was born as a walking, breathing, deathly skeleton of a child.

When she seduced him that night, so long ago now...he had been so serious that Margot had nearly laughed. She knew that neither of them were each other's first choice, but that didn't

mean that they couldn't enjoy the action itself. Sex, for Margot, has always been a freeing experience. It is the once time that she knows that she is entirely in control; every part of her is making the decisions, every part of her is alive and breathing and it is all confirmed for her by sweat and slick heat and muscles and writhing, aching flesh.

Sex with Alana is even better.

She remembers that first time so well, it's almost like every time since is that same moment all over again, but better hotter faster fitter slicker every single replay. She straddles Alana's lap to kiss her, and they fit as if they were made for each other. Alana's skin slips against hers, and Margot writhes as if pinned in God's light. They touch, and there was never a nectar more divine, never a wine sweeter than the taste of sweat and stinging lips. Not even the fruits of heaven could ever compare with the sound of silk on silk.

Alana has scars, and so does Margot. Physical ones, mental ones...they have both in abundance. There will always be some things they cannot do, perhaps due to Alana's hips or Margot's quirks. But, for the first time, Margot is a part of some thing that doesn't involve pain, or fear, or hatred. It's warm and tender and real and whole.

She and Will both have their histories of abuse and manipulation. She understands that haunted look in his eyes. But Margot prefers to laugh it off, to bury it deep. Will wears his hurt like torn gashes on his skin, bleeding sorrow at every twitch and jump and blink.

Margot gets it. They all have their ways of coping, she guesses - although Will Graham tends to not so much as cope than fight viciously at anything that might end up hurting him more. He fights, even if he's jabbing at a friend. He fights, even if he's clawing at thin air. He fights, and Margot thinks that, at some point, Will Graham has forgotten who the real enemy is, and it's not always the boogeyman in the closet.

She knows so well that sometimes, just sometimes, the real enemy is yourself.

The moon is silvery and full, and she casts her incandescent light over Will's terrified face like water.

Hannibal watches him out of the corner of his eye.

He's been driving south these last seven hours, following a long, winding scenic route through the forests and fields of rural Virginia. He's been heading in the vague direction of Garrett Jacob Hobbs's cabin, and is this is just as much for Will's benefit as Jack's. How else can he help Will slip his fingers beneath his mask, pull his human skin away and glimpse the beast within?

Will is staring at him now, and Hannibal resists the urge to smirk. It is cruel of him, perhaps, to tease the man like this, but Hannibal is a man of perfect taste, and Will's fear smells divine. It pours off him in waves; the scent of chloroform has long since worn off, and even his terrible aftershave has faded in lieu of the exquisite bouquet of terror that Will is bleeding.

Hannibal shifts a little in his seat, moves his right hand sharply just an inch down the wheel. He is rewarded with instinctual twitch from his passenger, a hiss as Will's wrist tugs harshly against the handcuffs.

Perhaps the restraints are a little crude. Hannibal knows that Will won't try to run away.

And even if he did, he thinks, with a smudge of pleasure at the irony, I would catch him.

"You can sleep, you know," he suggests, and silently revels as Will starts slightly. It amuses him, somehow, to know that despite everything, he can still surprise the man sat next to him.

"I'm fine," Will mutters, looking a little guilty. Hannibal watches him in his peripheral vision.

Will's hands intertwine in his lap like the coiling roots of some tender sapling. He is pale, Hannibal notices, with dark smudges under his eyes. Shock, probably. The strain on his not-quite-healed injuries. It suits Hannibal's purposes, although he decides to monitor Will's state as they continue their journey. It would not do for his mongoose to tire too early into the fight.

The brief flash of a passing streetlight illuminates Will's stubbled cheek for a moment, and Hannibal's mind is brought back and back again to that clifftop, that pool of blood, that beautiful, tattered embrace. There had been something agonisingly intimate in that moment; beast to beast and man to man. Will has always been able to surprise him.

He surprised Hannibal even more when he pulled them both over the edge.

Annoying, possibly. Intriguing, certainly. Hannibal had been so convinced of his own gravity that it had never even crossed his mind that Will would tug him over first. Hannibal is, dare he say it...impressed.

He drives a little more, and he considers this. Will's potential had been wasted under Jack Crawford's less-than-tender ministrations. His careless abandon with his profiler's exceptional abilities could be compared to using an obsidian knife to chop firewood.

Hannibal feels a sudden and irrational anger surge up, and hastily tamps it down. Will Graham is his weakness, he knows, and that is why, instead of leaving quietly, unobtrusively, he is giving his gift to Will.

As the man next to him sighs and twitches and bites his lip, Hannibal decides that he is, after all, entirely worth the trouble.

The night slips on by, blacker than sin. The moon slides like butter across the sky. Will Graham's consciousness ebbs and flows, until the tide is fully out, and his eyes droop shut like curtains, and he drifts away into a sea of Hannibal's devising.

After driving onwards for another mile, Hannibal loops around another road, sailing back the way they came. It's a shorter route - more direct - and the trap has already been set. He's been careful to pass two speed cameras at over sixty; even Jack will put two and two together eventually and realise where Hannibal is supposedly heading. He delights in the idea of enclosing Will in that antler-sharp attic of Hobbs's, but it's too obvious, too easy for anyone to pick up on. He's had to settle for a less illustrious location, but Hannibal's willing to go anywhere so long as Will's delicious mind is close at hand.

He drives for another hour in the direction of the coast, veering towards the right. He rests for thirty minutes in a side road while Will sleeps quietly beside him. His presence is enough to soothe Hannibal into a brief, peaceful slumber. When he wakes once more, he takes a long, smooth gulp of bitter black coffee from a thermos, and sets off once again. He drives for one more hour, and by now Hannibal has to admit that he is beginning to tire.

Will stirs at four in the morning, just as the stars are beginning to die, just as the night fades to a sharper, lighter blue. His dark brown curls are tousled, his eyes blurry with sleep. Hannibal admires the artistry of his profile.

"Where are we?" Will asks groggily, his voice scratchy from sleep. Hannibal passes him a bottle of water.

"We are almost there," he says, taking a right-hand turn. The location he has chosen, although being rather less than what he might have normally selected, does have the added benefits of being close to the sea, and also the last place that Jack Crawford would ever look.

Will snorts, sounding defensive. A trifle rude, perhaps, but something that Hannibal is willing to overlook. There is a great deal that he would overlook, for Will.

"That was impressively vague," Will says. His left hand clutches convulsively at the padding on the passenger seat.

Hannibal cannot resist a small smile, and he feels Will stiffen next to him. He knows the meaning of that action; understands why Will does it. It brings creamy satisfaction to Hannibal's throat.

The road becomes uneven. The car jolts, and Will tightens his grip on the seat. His knuckles turn white.

Everything - Hannibal thinks - every moment of his life, every choice that he made, every path that he ever took was worth it; worth every second of precious time, to be here now, in this moment.

Francis Dolarhyde believed that his transformation into the Dragon would be his becoming. He was wrong, of course; his transformation only heralded a far greater event. The Dragon's evolution was merely the precursor, the aperitif to Hannibal's own creation.

Yes, Francis Dolarhyde was only the overture to Will Graham.

A flash of teeth hovers once at his lips, the briefest glint of ivory, and then it is replaced with a burning excitement in his eyes as he guides the car into their final destination, an exhilaration that shines fiercely within him, unable to contain itself within his chest, because now, at last, the time has come, and Hannibal Lecter stops the car.

"We're here," he announces, glancing over at Will to gauge his reaction. Will peers out the rain-flecked window, into the early dawn, at the large, crumbling red-brick building that crouches incongruously in amongst the surrounding fringe of trees. Hannibal readies the needle.

"It's...not quite what I expected," Will confesses, sounding both disappointed and a little relieved. He sighs, worrying his wrist where the skin meets the handcuff. "Hannibal, tell me. Please. Why are you doing this?"

He is distracted, and Hannibal uses this to his advantage; Will never even glimpses Hannibal's reflection in the window.

Hannibal strikes, pressing Will's left hand into the seat with his knee and forcing Will's chin back with his forearm. Will struggles, eyes wide, his right hand flying up instinctively to protect himself, only to be pulled up short by the chain around it. Hannibal shushes him, adjusts his hold, and slides the needle into Will's neck a single, well-practiced glide. Will makes a small noise as the contents empty into his veins but eventually goes limp, perhaps sensing the futility of his situation. Hannibal locks eyes with him.

"Will, please. This is for your own good." Will's gaze is filled with bright blue betrayal and hurt, confusion and fear brimming around the sclera in equal measures. Hannibal has never before seen anything half so beautiful. "Hush, Will. Go into the quiet of the stream. You will understand soon, I promise."

Slowly, reluctantly, Will's eyelids droop, his breathing grows heavier, his eyes roll right back, and he sags like a doll in Hannibal's arms for the second time in the last ten hours.

Although he could stare all day, Hannibal doesn't; he wastes no time in unlocking the handcuffs and pulling Will from the car, into his arms. The drugs he administered - a heady cocktail he has dosed Will with once before, a lifetime ago in Florence - will only last so long, and Hannibal has work to do.

Carrying Will gently, as once might carry a priceless work of art, Hannibal crosses the car park and opens the door leading to the cellar. The stairs are slick and difficult to navigate, but with some negotiation and adjustment of his precious burden, he makes it down without incident.

The room beyond is drab, oozing water like tears down the walls, but it suits Hannibal's purposes, and he needs it only for one day. A chair, chosen long ago for intentions hugely dissimilar to his current ones (although perfectly suited for the job at hand) perches, like an ugly bat, in the centre of the room. It is in this chair that Hannibal deposits Will, who is beginning to show signs of consciousness, although he is nowhere near lucidity.

It's time.

Hannibal reaches - hovering nearby on its ungainly tripod - for the video camera.

Jack thinks he may be losing his mind.

He sees shadow in every corner. Every flicker of the strip lights make him clench his jaw, and he suspects that it's not all due to bad coffee.

Will Graham has been missing for over thirteen hours.

Alana glares at Jack from across the room, and he sighs. He can't deny it; he knows he deserves her scorn. Welcomes it, even. Because damn it, he'd rather have anything than sympathy right now, and he'll take what he can get. Will is depending on him. Jack needs to stay focused.

That piece of CCTV footage that Mapp dredged up is...unnerving. It feels wrong, just plain wrong to see someone get the jump on Will. The profiler has always, in Jack's mind at least, been something of a feral beast, always ready to lash out, never letting anything get close enough to hurt it.

There's an exception, of course, but Jack can't quite bring himself to name it, even in his head. Watching Will, drugged and strapped to a dining chair in Florence, had felt profoundly unsettling. Will wasn't meant to look that...calm. He was a taut bowstring, ready to snap at a moment's notice, and Jack feels like he should have noticed this a long, long time ago.

Jack fiddles with his pen lid, for something to do. He barks an order at a trainee and regrets it. He studiously avoids Alana Bloom's eye. If there was a sport for glaring, he thinks, then Alana would win it, hands down.

He almost feels normal again when Mapp, tucked away with her computer screen, gives a sudden gasp.

"Oh my God," she says, her face a mask of shock. Jack is immediately by her side.

"What -" he starts to say, but doesn't get to the end of his sentence. There really is no need to.

Other agents crowd around, but he ignores them. He cannot think. There is a loud rushing in his ears that he will later attribute to low blood-sugar, but is in reality entirely due to shock.

It's not every day that a serial killer comes back from the dead.

"Hello, Jack," says Hannibal Lecter congenially onscreen.

"Dear God," mumbles Price at Jack's shoulder, his eyes transfixed on Lecter's face. Jack agrees.

Lecter looks remarkably healthy, for someone who is supposed to be dead. He wears an unremarkable black sweater, so different from the suits Jack remembers him in that he has the sudden urge to laugh. Lecter is so close to the camera that his face fills the whole screen; no clues about his environment, location, position.

Jack snaps out of it.

"I want a location lock on him, stat," he demands, and it's as if he's broken a trance.

"On it, sir," says an agent to Mapp's left, already typing in the code. Jack continues to watch, feeling a faint thrill of horror course through him.

"As you can see, I am - disappointingly, I'm sure - still alive. No, no," he says, as if he can see what's happening at the other end, and Jack wonders if he can - "don't bother trying to track me. I assure you that my signal is perfectly shielded, and besides - in a moment you will desist, I'm sure."

"He's right, sir," a tech chips in, not even glancing up from her computer. "Complete lockdown. He's hopping IP addresses."

Jack grinds his teeth. Lecter smiles, and Jack would be lying if he said that it didn't scare him.

"Now," Lecter says pleasantly, as if they were sat at the dinner table. "I believe that you are looking for something. And I think I may be able to assist with that."

Alana freezes, suddenly at Jack's elbow. "Oh God," she says, and Jack's stomach lurches - he's talking about Will.

Lecter flashes his teeth, more like a display of dominance than anything else. Not that Jack had been expecting anything more cordial. "Well," he says, so fucking polite that it hurts, "I do believe that you would wish to glimpse him, in any case."

He steps aside, and there he is.

No one in the room can stifle a slight, audible intake of breath. No one but Jack.

Alana's finger suddenly dig so tightly into Jack's elbow that it goes numb.

It's Will.

He looks awful, actually, even on the screen. Lecter has him strapped to what looks like a goddamn dentist chair, propped up and facing the camera. His head lolls across the headrest, his damp curls stuck to his forehead with sweat. His skin looks pale and clammy, and there are dark circles under his eyes, which stare listlessly in the vague direction of the camera. They're unfocused, and Jack knows that he must have been drugged.

It's pathetic. Will looks pathetic. He looks like a puppy left out in the rain, and Jack's sure that's what he's meant to look like.

But there is suddenly something that he is blindingly sure of.

Will Graham is innocent.

Jack won't lie: he's been harbouring doubts about the role Will playing in taking Dolarhyde down. Something didn't quite add up. No matter how many times he ran it throb in his mind, there was something that didn't quite make sense.

Why would Hannibal Lecter let Will live?

The answer stands right in front of him.

He never meant to in the first place. He's come back to finish the job.

Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. My fault, my own grievous fault.

Lecter prowls around the chair until he is hovering just behind Will, looking for all the world like a panther, poised to strike. He slides his fingers around Will's jaw, and Will unconsciously leans into the touch. He looks young and open and heartbreakingly innocent. Jack crushes his takeaway cup in his fist.

"I'm sure we can come to some agreement," Lecter continues. "I may value this...but there is something I value more." His fingers tighten on Will's jaw, and his other hand comes to rest on the juncture between Will's neck and chest. His fingers contract. "I want my freedom."

"No," Jack hears himself say.

"Are you out of your mind?" Alana hisses. Jack doesn't know if she's talking to him or Lecter.

"It's quite simple," Lecter says. "You turn a blind eye to my exiting the country. You make no attempt to follow me. I disappear, you do nothing. And in exchange..." He glances down at Will, looking faintly amused. "In exchange, you can have Will Graham back. In one piece, more or less."

Will's eyes are unfocused and glazed over, but Jack still feels as if they burn into his very soul.

"You have to do it," Alana says insistently. She holds Jack's elbow in a vice-grip. "You have to save him, Jack!"

"Alana," he says. "Alana. You know we can't. You know we don't pay ransoms."

Alana stares at him in disbelief, looking as if in all her life she's never come across something quite so disgusting before. Jack feels inclined to agree with her.

Onscreen, Lecter's hands tighten, his fingers resting against the pulse point on Will's neck. Will sits there, like a doll. Unfocused. Helpless.

"Think about it," Lecter says. "You have three hours to reply. I will be watching."

There is a pause, and Lecter looks suddenly, oddly, disturbingly, like an avenging angel.

"If you don't," he says, "there will be consequences." And his hands tighten slightly on Will's throat.

The screen goes black.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, sorry for the awful lag between chapters. Hope it was worth it!

Quantum Logic

Chapter Summary

In which Jack and Alana argue, Jimmy Price takes a trip, and Hannibal takes the opportunity to... get to know Will a little better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

To say that room has gone mad would be an understatement. At least, that's what Ardelia thinks as she stares unashamedly at the argument brewing between Crawford and Dr. Bloom.

"Are you insane?" Bloom demands, wheeling around again to stare Crawford to death. "I'm afraid of Hannibal as much as you are, Jack, but this is -"

"I'm not afraid of Lecter, Alana, this is a matter of state security -"

"He's your friend -"

"Will's not my friend, he's a colleague. That's all."

"Oh? Are you sure? Well, someone better tell him, then, because I seem to remember you coercing him into every damn crime scene you could get your filthy hands on, calling him friend, and partner, and pal -"

"Alana, you're being unreasonable."

"I'm being unreasonable?"

"You're a consulting civilian. If you can't keep calm, then I'll have you pulled from the room. Understand?"

Ardelia doesn't hang around to hear the rest. She makes the excuse of needing the bathroom, and slips out the door. The argument does not sound any quieter even in the corridor.

She hides in the restrooms on the first floor. Her head is pounding and good God, does she need coffee, but she doubts she'll get another rest break any time soon. She perches on the toilet seat, feet up against the door, and thinks. She chews on a hangnail and furrows her brow.

Suddenly, Ardelia isn't so sure of what she knows. She's always been a woman of very fixed ideals, and a very strong sense of black and white truths: what's right is right and what's wrong is wrong. It's as simple as that. Cake is good, hitting people is bad (unless they really

deserve it), and usually, once Ardelia makes up her mind about something, it's almost impossible to change it. Except...

She feels that what she once knew about Will Graham is slowly crumbling into dust. This isn't about petty classroom feuds anymore. A man's life is on the line, and this is very, very real. No more training simulations. No more practice tests. This is an actual, honest-to-God hostage situation, and they've only got two hours and forty-five minutes left. And it actually occurs to Ardelia that Hannibal Lecter could very well kill Will Graham.

So much for star-crossed love.

She pulls out her phone and calls Clarice. Her friend answers on the fourth ring.

"...Delia?" a groggy voice mumbles on the other end. "It's – what – six in the morning?"

"Yeah." Ardelia gives a shaky, nerve-filled laugh. "I, uh, couldn't sleep. Busy, you know. Coffee."

Clarice yawns. "Are you still with Crawford? He wanted you to look through CCTV, right?"

"Yeah. Listen – they found Graham. Sorta."

"What do you mean, sorta found him?" Clarice sounds suddenly wide-awake. Ardelia can picture her just about vibrating from curiosity. "Have ya found him or not?"

Ardelia explains the footage from the gas stations, and the video they were sent. When she reaches the part about Hannibal Lecter coming back from the dead, Clarice gasps loud enough for Ardelia to wince and hold the phone away from her ear.

"No way!" she enthuses, because only Clarice would get excited about a serial killer on the loose. "I totally thought he was dead. Like, totally. Did you know he has one of the highest IQs in recorded history?"

"I do now," Ardelia sighs. She should have remembered Clarice's obsession with the Chesapeake Ripper. "Look, Reece, I have to go..."

"Update me!" Clarice says cheerfully. "Thanks for waking me up, by the way – I have a psych test in an hour."

Sometimes Ardelia wonders just what is wrong with that girl.

Despite everything, though, she feels weirdly less gloomy than she did before. Despite her roommate's gruesome sense of humour, Clarice has an uncanny ability to cheer Ardelia up whenever she needs it the most. In fact, she feels positively cheerful when she returns to the office, finally feeling up to the task of sifting through another ream of footage. She puts a hand on the doorknob to enter the room, but is promptly almost knocked over as Dr. Bloom pushes past, a few telltale tears on her cheeks. She looks angry, angrier than Ardelia has ever seen her before, and she knows that it's probably a good idea to keep out of her way.

Ardelia slips back behind her desk, and pulls up the CCTV footage once again.

Alana viciously twists the wedding ring on her finger until it hurts, and seriously considers the merits of committing murder. Behind her, she can hear Jack issuing instructions through the doors of his office.

“Cooper, get your team together. Why? Because I said so, damn it! A man’s life in on the line, and – No, you’re going to Garrett Jacob Hobbs’s cabin. Of course I’m sure. Well, no, but it’s the best chance we’ve got. Listen, Cooper, we’ve got a little under three hours, and you can make it to the cabin in half that. Damn right I’m not wrong. Now get your team together and scram. You’ve got a serial killer to hunt.”

Agent Cooper – young, tall, and gingery – pushes through the door, Price and Zeller hot on his heels. He spares a brief glance at Alana, but too soon he’s turned a corner, and then he’s gone. Alana relinquishes her grip on her wedding ring with a sigh. It’s little more than a slim gold band, but it’s enough. On the inside, Margot had an inscription carved. Alana pulls the ring off and looks at it now.

To err is human; To forgive, divine.

Alexander Pope, if she’s not mistaken. An Essay on Criticism. She slides the ring back onto her finger. She’s going to need a lot more than divinity to forgive Jack Crawford. She’s going to need even more than that to forgive herself.

She makes for the door, yanking it open and gulping down the cold, clean air. She checks her watch; it’s quarter past six in the morning and still dark. Her breath steams in the chilly air. Her phone buzzes – Margot.

“Hi,” Alana says, answering the phone. She sounds tired, she knows she does, but she can’t possibly inject enthusiasm into her voice. Margot will understand. Margot always understands.

“Hi,” says Margot softly, sweetly. “I guess you’ll be home late, then.” There’s a touch of humour to her tone.

Alana huffs a laugh. “You guessed right. I’ve got a feeling that I’m going to be here for a while.” Quickly, she fills Margot in on the details: the CCTV, the video, the team sent out to Hobbs’s cabin. Margot listens quietly, without interrupting. She’s changed, but so has Alana. They may be more than the sum of their parts, but their pain is equal to the sum of their scars.

Margot says, “What do you think he’s planning?”

“Jack? God knows.” Alana presses her cool fingertips against her forehead, and hopes she’s not getting wrinkles. She’s far too young to be getting wrinkles.

“No, not Jack, Alana. Hannibal. What is he going to do?”

Alana sighs. “Jesus. If I knew, I’d earn a fortune in psychology interviews, that’s for sure. He’s unreadable. He has a people mask that he wears in company, and only tears off when the moon is full. The only time I’ve ever seen beneath it is when he looks at Will Graham.”

Margot is silent. Alana can hear her breathing by the phone, so she knows that the connection isn’t cut. Finally, Margot says, “Poor bastard.”

Alana couldn’t agree more.

She hangs up and goes inside.

Ok, you’ve got him. Jimmy Price has never liked flying, and to be honest, sitting next to Brian “I can snore for England” Zeller isn’t helping one bit.

“Look, could you quit it for just five minutes?” he hisses at the unconscious, oblivious Zeller. “Cooper’s gonna kick your ass. I’m gonna kick your ass, if you don’t shut up. Well, I’ll get Cooper to do it for me, but I’ll still be doing it in spirit, so it counts. Goddamn, Zeller, Beverly Katz is gonna come back from the dead for the sole purpose of shutting you up. Hell, God Almighty himself will intervene if you don’t stop making that godawful noise. Jesus Christ.”

Zeller continues snoring blissfully through Price’s tirade, so he does himself a favour and takes a quick nip from his hipflask. Unprofessional, sure, but he bets that even Overlord Crawford would do the same, if he’d been sat next to Zeller’s snoring for the last hour and a half. Besides, it’s medicinal. He’s probably gone partially deaf in his right ear by now.

This is an ordinary job. It should be. Well, it would be, if it didn’t involve Will Graham and Hannibal “Sike, I’m the Chesapeake Ripper!” Lecter. Those two could be the last two men on earth and they’d still find a way to somehow screw it up. Price isn’t gonna lie, Graham’s always creeped him out a bit. He’d never quite make eye-contact, which Price could understand. But the way he’d sorta skulk around the edges of the room, occasionally making creepy-ass comments about whatever corpse they were slice’n’ dicing that day...well, it was enough to give Price’s heebies jeebies.

Although, Price thinks, he always did a pretty good job not freaking out too obviously about Graham. Better than Zeller, anyway. That man has the social skills of a walrus.

He sighs, taps his nails. Scratches a little. They’re getting VIP transport to the cabin – the BAU’s very own private airplane. Despite his raging flight-hatred, Price will not deny that this is one sweet ride they got here. The perks of serial-killer hunting, he supposes. Cushy. There’s even a cupholder in his armrest, not that he could use it. Zeller is sprawled in the most annoying way possible across his seat and Price’s armrest, his hand nestled in the cupholder. It’s a shame. Price could do with a coffee. One with a shot of vodka in it.

Beverly used to be the best on this kind of flight. She had no such compunctions about giving Zeller a sharp rap on the skull to shut him up. And she was an ace at poker – never lost a game. Damn, Price even remembers the time she got Cooper, that old sonofabitch, to smile.

God, Beverly was the best.

Price misses her.

It's just another thing to blame Lecter for.

There'd been a betting pool, back before all this crap had come to a head, about whether Lecter or Graham would actually bite the bullet and make out. Price had twenty dollars on Graham awkwardly blurting it out at the annual BAU Christmas party (after Bev had got him smashed, of course). For a while it had seemed like it was actually going to happen...but then there was the thing with Abigail Hobbs and suddenly Graham was an inmate...and yeah, Price kinda doubted that they'd let someone branded "criminally insane" into a staff Christmas party.

Pity. It would have been hilarious.

They land at the airport and drive for half an hour into the woods, cramped up in their tiny squad van. Zeller and Price are shoved together in the spots furthest from the door. They're there to play Shaggy and Scooby and look for clues, not to actually fight. (God forbid. Zeller with a gun would be a disaster).

Price mentions this to Zeller, who grunts. "Dude, get a grip. You'd totally be the dog."

"Would not."

"Would too."

"Knock it off," Cooper barks, and they fall silent like scolded kids.

Beverly would definitely be Velma, Price thinks to himself, and cannot repress a grin.

They arrive at Hobbs's cabin with only half an hour to spare. In another thirty minutes, Price remembers, Lecter is gonna go full-on Psycho on Will Graham's ass. They'd better hope to God that he's in there, or Graham is gonna be toast.

No, Price has never been overly fond of Graham, who he swears does creepy for a living, but he can't help but feel sorry for the guy. I mean, kidnapped in his own house? By the Chesapeake Ripper? Again? Price doesn't want to make a habit of it, but when he saw Graham back on that computer screen, drugged and tied to a chair, he couldn't stop a wince of sympathy. He knows that Zeller is gonna give him hell for it once this is all over. If it's ever all over.

"Hey. Check it out," Zeller says by his ear. Price nearly jumps a foot in the air.

"Christ, Zeller, you wanna give a guy a coronary?"

Zeller ignores him. "Look at Cooper and Agent Okoye. Go on. Tell me he isn't flirting."

Price sighs good-naturedly and follows Zeller's sight-line. He cannot believe the crap he puts up with from this guy. "I'm not sure if Cooper even can flirt," he comments absently. "I was kinda under the impression that he was some sorta human/reptile crossover...oh man. You actually weren't kidding."

Cooper is very seriously checking the straps on Agent Okoye's flak jacket. She gives him a fond smile, white teeth bright against her dark skin.

"Goddamn," says Price in awe, "I didn't think he had it in him."

The moment doesn't last, however; Cooper finishes his doe-eyed flirtation and immediately snaps back into pain-in-the-ass soldier mode. Shame. Price kinda likes the sappy version. On the plus side, Cooper's pale skin is still flushed, so that's something they can all tease him about later. Assuming there is a later, that is.

Cooper holds up a hand. "Let's go," he hisses, and the squad move in. Price and Zeller stay by the van. Price wishes for caffeine.

Zeller nudges him. "Price," he says.

"What?"

"Wanna play I spy?"

Price smacks him, and he yelps.

Five minutes later, and Price has to admit that he's getting nervous. He's not sure what's worse: finding Lecter's here, or finding that he's not. Either way, it's gonna involve some pretty hefty paperwork, and that is something that he is definitely not looking forward to.

You know, looking back on it with the benefit of hindsight, Price can't believe he didn't realise it before. Some vic would show up on the slab with their organs missing, and two days later Hannibal Lecter would throw a dinner party. Price actually went to dinner at Lecter's house once, after a recent influx of Ripper killings. He remembers being served liver, and then thinking inexplicably of the missing liver in the Ripper victim that very morning...

(After learning what Lecter had been serving them, Price had brushed his teeth so hard that his gums bled.)

Cooper returns, looking serious. This isn't an unusual occurrence (Cooper has a stick shoved so far up his ass that you can see it when he opens his mouth). The weird thing is that the rest of the team are all wearing the same expression.

"Crap," Zeller says.

"Ya think?" Price replies.

The cabin, Hobbs's cabin...is empty. Untouched. Covered in dust. No one's been inside in years.

No Graham. No Lecter. And only fifteen minutes to go.

Shit.

Jack is gonna be pissed.

There are hands on his brow, soothing, cold, smoothing his hair back from his forehead. Will's mouth is dry. He can't quite focus on anything in front of him, cocooned in a strange sort of morphic haze that cushions him from the pain he's sure he's supposed to be feeling right now. His vision blurs. He shivers, despite not feeling cold. He doesn't particularly feel anything. He opens his mouth to speak, but either he makes no sound at all or he just can't hear it. Through his half-closed eyes, Will can see the hazy shape of the wendigo, bent over his prone form.

He moves. Not consciously; he just does. The wendigo reaches for him and Will panics, eyes rolling, fingers twitching of their own volition. The shadowy mouth opens and closes, but Will doesn't understand what it's trying to say. He's not entirely sure that he remembers his own name.

"Will," he hears dimly. "Calm yourself, Will. Can you hear me?"

He clings to the sound of the voice like a lifeline, as if at any moment he will be swept away by the current of the stream that he swears wasn't there a moment ago.

A set of claws closes gently over his fingers, and Will relaxes, tipping softly back into oblivion. He welcomes it. It makes a nice change from reality.

Will wakes again, properly this time. He moans and cracks his eyes open carefully, feeling like he is one sudden movement away from cracking like fragile china. He takes in his surroundings, trying very hard not to move his head, which aches as though it has been stuffed with hot cotton wool.

He is slumped in an armchair, a huge wingback with delicately embroidered red fabric that wouldn't look out of place in a museum, and seems totally incongruous in a damp, cold basement. Will feels oddly as though he has found a diamond in a trashcan. There is an

electric heater placed carefully beside the armchair, which Will cannot help but feel pitifully grateful for. The chill in the basement seems to permeate his very bones.

His feet are bare, as are his legs, and Will realises with growing embarrassment that he is wearing nothing but his black boxers and a large, pale blue shirt that he is certain does not belong to him. The sleeves have been rolled up to fit him, and the top two buttons are undone. He feels oddly exposed.

In front of him, in a similar armchair, sits Hannibal Lecter.

Will somehow can't quite bring himself to feel surprise, only vague resignation. His last memories are beginning to bubble to the surface; the car, the building, the drugs. Hannibal watches him, studying him, like a wolf studies a fox, deciding whether or not it is prey. Their chairs face each other, so close that Will's bare feet, stretched out in front of him, almost graze Hannibal's expensive black shoes. It is a parody of their psychiatry sessions, yes, but Will feels strangely comforted by it.

The shirt, he realises, smells of Hannibal. Lemony cologne. Soap. Skin. He feels as though he has been marked, like a possession. He doesn't know what to think about that, and decides to leave it for later.

"Will," says Hannibal pleasantly, as if they've sat down for therapy. "I see you're awake."

"Yes," Will replies, wondering if he's about to wake up for real any minute now in his hotel room, with sixteen missed calls and mud on his shoes. "I – Hannibal, what's going on?"

"Surely you must have guessed?" Hannibal asks. He seems a little disappointed, but Will is fed up with being treated like a child.

"The only thing I can guess right now is that I have a headache, the door to this basement is locked, and you have a gun hidden beneath your chair cushion," Will tells him bluntly, without preamble. He's not in the mood for games.

Hannibal raises an eyebrow, looking impressed. "You are quite correct," he says. His eyes don't waver from Will's, although his hand twitches, just slightly, towards the bulge under the seat where Will knows he has hidden the gun. After a moment of sustained eye-contact, Will's nerve leaves him and he looks away.

He can't understand how he'd ever managed to look people in the eye before. Now it suddenly feels harder than scaling a mountain.

Hannibal says, "Have you ever heard of Schrödinger's Cat?" Will shrugs, taken aback by the sudden change of conversation.

"Sure," he says. "Covered it in high school physics class. The teacher – he, uh, hated teaching the syllabus. Said it restricted learning, or something, I don't know. Anyway, he comes in one day holding the cat, and puts it on the desk. Nice cat. I remember, it was a tabby. So, he pulls out this cardboard box and puts the cat in it, seals it up with tape. And he says, 'I've put the cat in the box, right? Say I've hypothetically put in a jar of poison, that has

a fifty percent change of spilling over and killing the cat. Without opening the box, tell me: is the cat alive or dead?' And we were stuck for a good minute, trying to figure it out, when suddenly the teacher freaks. Rips off the tape on the box and hauls the cat out. Turns out he'd forgotten to put airholes in the damn box. We joked afterwards that he'd nearly proved that the cat was dead."

Will laughs, remembering the look on the teacher's face. "I could have told him that it didn't matter about the airholes anyway. I was watching from the far corner. By the time he opened the box again, the cat had chewed a hole in the bottom of the box."

Hannibal chuckles and Will does too, feeling a warm, strange happiness glow in his stomach. He's missed this. If he closes his eyes, he can even imagine that Hannibal never framed him for the Ripper murderers, that Abigail Hobbs never died. Right here, right now, they are sat in Hannibal's study again, the fire blazing, and Will's eyes are alight with joy.

"Some people believe," Hannibal tells him, "that there are millions of parallel universes in existence. Every choice that we make, every tiny decision, creates a new universe. Every time you choose a different path to go down, there still exists a faint echo, another universe where you made a different decision, chose a different road. And life continues on in those universes, with not a thought to those who live on with the decisions they never made. Just as we likewise never give thought to our shadow-selves, except in passing regret. In our existences, in our multiple universes, we are both alive and dead. Just like..."

"Schrödinger's Cat," Will finishes, his eyes lifting to meet Hannibal's, and this time, he doesn't pull them away. Hannibal smiles, although only with his eyes. Will feels, for the first time, that he is looking into the most vulnerable part of Hannibal's soul.

Hannibal reaches out and softly, tenderly, takes Will's hands with his own. Will lets him.

"There is a universe, then," Hannibal says quietly, "that contains a happy family. A man with no more scars on his skin, and a man who has left the crimes of his past behind him. A house. A dog. A daughter with long, dark hair who never died." He pauses, and his next words are so hushed that Will has to strain to hear them. "If I could return to that turning point, that bend in the path...I would choose to join that universe."

They have moved unconsciously closer together. Their knees are just touching. Will no longer feels self-conscious about his state of dress, or his scars, or his tattered gaze. He only feels an intense and beautiful wonder.

"I would choose that universe, too," he whispers to Hannibal.

And slowly, carefully, holding each other as though either might shatter, they brush together in a kiss.

Will has one hand fisted in Hannibal's shirt, the other curled round the back of the taller man's neck. His stubble scrapes against Hannibal's skin as he kisses him, and he winces at the thought of what it is doing to the other's skin. Hannibal's hands – large, warm and steady – are on him; one on his waist, the other methodically opening the buttons on Will's

borrowed shirt, one by one. His knee slides between Will's legs and Will groans, kissing harder.

They are standing. Will doesn't know exactly when that happened, but he doesn't really care. His head is spinning, his mouth gasping for more, and he doesn't think he's ever been this hard before in his life. He can't think, cannot process anything other than Hannibal's mouth on his, skin against skin – oh, that felt good – a broad hand on his jaw. That cologne – it's everywhere. On his skin. Sinking through his pores. Clinging to his hair.

Will makes a sound that he'll probably be embarrassed about later, and pulls Hannibal closer. He sinks into the touch, craving the intimacy he's spent a lifetime trying to avoid; Hannibal's hand brushes over his bare chest and Will sighs into his mouth. His shirt is half hanging off his shoulders and he's sure he looks a mess, but Hannibal, as usual, is perfectly put-together. Will pulls at the other man's shirt, fully intending to correct this, when Hannibal suddenly stills, an arm around Will's waist and Will's fingertips tangled in his hair. They pause, their lips only a centimeter apart, breathing in the same air...

"What is it?" Will pants. He can feel Hannibal's heart, still remarkably steady, keeping time against his chest. Hannibal is watching him quietly, and Will meets his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Will," says Hannibal evenly, and before Will can react, before he can say a word, Hannibal's fist suddenly blurs up to his jaw and the world is knocked sideways.

He can't believe it. Will honestly can't believe it. He reels internally in shock, pure, undiluted shock, until his brain comes back online and he lashes out instinctively. Unfortunately, in the time that it took for his thoughts to reconnect, Hannibal has already dragged him over to a large and threatening contraption that looks worryingly like a dentist chair, and is in the process of strapping him down. He easily catches Will's fist as he flails out, pulling his wrist down hard and buckling it to the arm rest with little difficulty. Will struggles, but he knows it's hopeless. His left arm and ankle have already been rendered immobile.

"Don't try to struggle, Will," Hannibal warns him, but Will does anyway. He receives a lazy backhand across the face in return, and when he comes to again, his other limbs are secured, and a thick leather strap fastens his hips to the chair. There's the taste of blood in his mouth, and he knows his lip is split. His nose is bleeding. There's a cut in his left eyebrow.

"Why?" he manages to get out, before Hannibal turns away. Will is shaking from adrenaline and fear, and any previous arousal has magically dripped away. Trauma will do that to you.

Hannibal looks him in the eye, and it's still so tender, so intimate that Will feels sick to his stomach.

"I am sorry about this," he says again, sounding almost painfully genuine, and terror bolts up Will's veins.

Oh God.

Hannibal tugs Will's shirt open, brushing his fingers across the pale, puckered curve of the scar on his abdomen. Will tries to squirm away, but his movement is hampered by the strap

across his hips. He shudders. Disgust seals up his insides like glue.

Looking disappointed, Hannibal bares Will's pale, sweating chest, and fiddles with the levers of the chair until it reclines fully. Will feels as if he's waiting for a root canal. A root canal would probably be preferable to what Hannibal Lecter has in mind.

Glancing to his right, Will stares, bewildered, at what Hannibal is manipulating now. And, even as he stares, a blinking red light comes on, like the eye of some poisonous snake.

The agents hum busily around the room, their beetle-black suits making Jack think of a swarm of flies. Every computer has someone jabbing at it; every agent available is on this case. But it's not enough.

Jack checks his watch. Only fifteen minutes left.

He's antsy. There's been no word yet from the team he sent out to Hobbs's cabin, and they should have called by now. He fiddles with the strap of his Rolex, and tries very, very hard not to think about what Lecter is planning on doing with Will Graham.

He's just contemplating starting up another argument with Alana – just for something to do – when a trainee appears at his elbow with his mobile phone. It rings loudly and insistently. Jack answers it.

“Crawford.”

“Agent Crawford, it's Cooper,” a voice on the line says, heavily laced with static.

Jack's stomach lurches. “Status report.”

The reply is barely audible, the words too faint and crackling to understand. Jack shakes his head impatiently; they are losing precious minutes. “Repeat that for me, Cooper.”

“----- house, sir. We ----- unoccupied. Requ-----.”

“The house – state again, is that positive?”

“Negative, sir. The house is empty. No signs of life. We request further instructions.”

“Damnit!” Jack swears, and regrets it. He does normally try not to swear in front of colleagues; it's unprofessional. He sighs. “Cooper, bring your team back to base. I've gotta feeling we're gonna need all hands on deck sooner or later.”

“Roger that, sir.” The static cuts off and Cooper is gone.

Five minutes left.

The hive of activity eventually quiets down, people abandoning hopeless tasks one by one, until everyone in the room is gathered round Mapp's computer. The air hums with nervous anticipation. There's a morbid fascination involved; nobody particularly wants to see Will Graham hurt, but everybody wants to know what the Ripper plans on doing next.

One minute left.

Alana is chewing her perfectly manicured nails next to him, the waxed space between her eyebrows tightly creased with worry. Jack notices that his hands are actually trembling, and his hastily stuffs them into his pockets. The final seconds trickle past like water.

Five seconds.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

Mapp's screen goes black. The assembled crowd sucks in a breath.

A video pings up, and there he is again: Hannibal Lecter. Same place. Same clothes. Same awful, foxlike smile.

"Tut tut, Jack," he says, his eyes gleaming. The video quality of this file is much better than the last one. "Choosing not to save your pet profiler? How unspeakably rude. And, as I am about to demonstrate, your actions have consequences."

And weakly, offscreen, Jack hears a desperate voice plead, "Hannibal."

"Oh my God," Alana says softly. They both know who it is.

Lecter turns from the camera, approaching the same dentist chair from before. It's changed position: it no longer faces the camera, but now lies flat, with Will in full view in profile from his right-hand side. There are straps pinning him fast at the wrists, ankles and hips. His face is busted up something awful. Split lip, the beginnings of a black eye...it's hard for Jack to think that this is only a starter. Oddly, Will is dressed only in a too-big, pale blue shirt and a pair of black boxers. It makes him look naked. Vulnerable.

"Hannibal," he is saying, struggling, "what are you doing? What are you – stop this. Please. Just stop. I – oh God. Please, don't. Don't. Oh god, oh god -"

His words cut off abruptly as Hannibal appears, ghostlike on his left-hand side, and Jack sees why: he has the sharp blade of a scalpel to his throat.

“Now, Will,” Lecter says, smoothing Will’s hair back from his forehead. “Do try not to struggle.”

Jack can see Will’s eyes, wide with fear, as Lecter snaps on a pair of surgical gloves. Will’s shirt gapes open, revealing his bare chest, which rises and falls increasingly quickly. Lecter rests the tip of the scalpel on Will’s breastbone, and Will manages, if possible, to pale even further. Lecter smiles, and his teeth are sharp.

“Actions have consequences, Jack,” he says, and he cuts.

At first, Will cries out, and then, as the scalpel slices further, his cries give way to screams. Back in Jack’s office, several agents turn away. Someone gags. Next to Jack, Alana grips her phone so tightly that the case cracks, her jaw clenched. Jack can’t even bring himself to avert his eyes. He stares, in morbid horror, as Will screams, as blood begins to drip down his sides, as that pale blue shirt turns slowly scarlet.

It takes fifteen minutes of carving until Lecter is finished, and by then, Will has stopped screaming. He lies limp as a doll in the dentist chair, his skin pale and slick with sweat and blood. Jack wouldn’t know he was still alive, if it weren’t for the minute rise and fall of his chest to show that he was still breathing.

Lecter steps back, admiring his work. He puts down the scalpel and pulls off the gloves. He looks pristine, and it feels somehow wrong, even more than it should have. Jack feels as though Lecter should be dripping in Will’s blood, wearing his crime on his skin. Lecter reaches down and deftly manipulates the chair’s mechanics, swinging it up and around so it faces the camera, so that Jack can get a good look at his artistry.

Someone retches. Several others leave the room.

For carved deeply into Will’s chest, still dripping gore, are four words:

THIS
IS
MY
DESIGN

And, engraved elegantly into the skin below Will’s smiling scar on his abdomen, are the initials HL.

Lecter comes back into frame. He fills the screen. He fills Jack’s head.

“You have three hours,” he says, and the screen goes dark.

Thanks for waiting so patiently! I worked like a demon to get this chapter finished.
Thank you all so much for the wonderful comments you posted on here. It really made my day. See you next chapter!

The Wicker Man

Chapter Summary

In which Jack launches a rescue, Ardelia receives her first mission, and Will is left an obscure clue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Even in the damp chill of the basement, Will sweats feverishly, although he shivers and his skin is icy cold. Hannibal takes his pulse, checks his vitals. They're just about acceptable, better than he'd expected. Will's breaths are ragged and uneven, his eyes slick white half-moons just visible beneath his lids, and his mouth hangs slightly ajar. It's vital that Hannibal acts now, or the man in front of him will soon go into shock.

He starts with the straps, undoing them swiftly, deftly, his fingers like pale spiders spinning their webs. Will's wrists and ankles are chafed and bleeding from where he strained, screaming, at his bonds. Hannibal takes note of this but makes no move to touch them; hands and feet will keep. The wounds on Will's chest will not.

He tilts the chair back, elevating Will's feet and giving himself room to work. Antiseptic on the cuts. Will flinches and mumbles but stays groggy, unfocused. This is probably for the best.

The slices Hannibal made in Will's skin, although horrific at first glance, are actually not as bad as they seem. Once he has cleaned the incisions thoroughly, they seem neat, surgical. Shallower than they appear at first glance. Though they will scar, they will heal well. Much quicker than the gleaming smile on Will's abdomen.

This is what Hannibal intended. This is Hannibal's design.

How often did he hear Will say those words? In their sessions, under his breath at a vicious crime scene, slurring them when Hannibal caught him losing time... Hannibal had at first dismissed them as a psychological trick, Will's way of distancing himself from the minds he was forced to share skulls with from time to time. It was only once Will killed Randall Tier and whispered the words so softly, so intimately, that Hannibal had understood.

And Hannibal wanted Will to understand this message, too.

He wraps the wounds tightly in gauze and bandages. No stitches here – they're clean and neat enough to last a few more hours, and Will hasn't yet lost enough blood to warrant immediate concern. Besides, Hannibal wouldn't want Uncle Jack and his followers to get the wrong idea.

For hasn't this all been an opera of delusion? Every step he's taken, every tiny decision he's made has been calculated, validated, evaluated. Hurting Will was all at once necessary, regretful and delightful. A masterpiece! A glorious creation! Will is at last innocent, acquitted of all charges, and perhaps, in time...

No time now, of course. Will is stirring; Hannibal must cover him – carefully, so his wounds are not jostled – with a blanket. He does so, smoothing it like a second skin, moulding it to suit his purposes. He slides a pillow under Will's head, pulls socks onto his cold, bare feet. There, better. Much.

Hannibal knows that he is acting too emotionally, too passionately to be rational. But he is so close. He can almost – not quite, but almost – feel his control slipping, just ever so slightly. This is bad. Almost intolerable. His thoughts are short and stilted. But he knows that where Will Graham is concerned, he is never logical.

Will gives a moan, moves his head weakly. Hannibal is at his side in a moment, tipping water, drop by drop, onto his parched lips. Will coughs once, twice, and his eyelids flutter. Hannibal's heart – if he would ever admit that it was anything but a muscle designed to pump blood through the body – may also mimic them, just for a moment. Will's breath stutters; he is trying to speak.

"Hush, Will," says Hannibal softly, brushing his fingers through damp brown curls, drifting his hand across that pale, sculpted brow. "Save your strength. Be careful of your injuries."

Will's mouth moves, and something in Hannibal's chest leaps. He feels drawn, inexorably so, towards this man. He feels a sudden, profound sorrow at having even lifted a finger against him. It is so rare a feeling to him that for a moment Hannibal goes quite still with surprise.

"Hannibal..." Will slurs, his lips tinged a little blue.

Hannibal cannot help but lean closer. Will has forgiven him. Will wants to speak to him. Will wants to be near him. Will, Will, Will...

"Fuck you," Will manages to croak, and lapses back into semi-unconsciousness.

Hannibal concedes he may have deserved that.

The whole room is quiet, so quiet and still that it feels as if everything has been painted grey. Time seems to have stopped. It feels blasphemous, obscene, to even think of speaking.

When Jack was very young, he had found a bird's nest in the cherry tree at the bottom of the garden. Every day he visited it until the birds hatched; fragile and crumpled, as if they had been twisted together from pipe cleaners and newspaper. A week later, Jack found one of the chicks on the ground underneath the nest, where it had fallen like an orange leaf from its home. Instead of leaving it to fend for itself, Jack had gently picked it up and placed it carefully back in the nest. When he had returned the next day, he found that the mother, not recognizing Jack's scent on the bird, had killed it.

Jack's had more than his fill of metaphors by now, but, staring at Agent Mapp's blank monitor, he can't help but compare that ill-fated bird to Will Graham.

How many times had Will fallen, so to speak, out of the nest? And how many times had Jack, with the very best of intentions, placed him safely back inside, only for Will to break his neck?

Hannibal Lecter's sharp eye teeth remind Jack unsettlingly of a fox.

Suddenly, a rush of noise is surrounding him, and time is hot and colourful and running back at normal speed, although there is a slight treacle-thickness to it, as if Jack has to strain to keep up with the seconds. His vision is no longer grey, although the world seems a touch too red to feel comfortable. There's an agent – no, two agents – at his elbow, and in front of him, her brown eyes sharp and hot and accusing, is Dr. Alana Bloom.

"Sir," one of the agents – Agent Khan, he thinks – is saying. "Sir, our instructions...?"

Alana is pulling that face, the one that reads: If you don't do something about this right now, I will do it for you. No compromises. She has elevated beyond fright and worry into steely resolve. Alana Bloom, in a crisis, is both practical and deadly.

Jack wishes he had her guts. He really does. She's the type of woman who, if given the chance, would happily smack Hitler in the face. She would probably try to take Hannibal on single-handed. He can't deny to himself that Alana Bloom is probably far braver than he is.

He steels himself. "Let's talk outside."

With whispers bubbling up around them like molten tar, Jack opens the door for Alana, and they escape into the hallway.

Before the door swings shut, Jack catches Ardelia Mapp's eye.

He is still alive. Since this is an unexpected development, Will doesn't quite know what to make of this and his body makes the decision for him to lie very, very still.

There is the shape of the wendigo moving beside him; Will isn't stupid, he knows that it and Hannibal Lecter are one and the same. His eyes are drifting. There is a green wash of mould across the ceiling that, if he focuses on it, looks a little like a dragonfly. His vision is blurred around the edges. He can't quite seem to care about anything. He knows that he should be upset about how close to death he probably is, but it doesn't seem all that important.

A shadow brushes across his face, and Will wonders idly if the grim reaper has turned up to take him away. The absurd notion of free heavenly wifi that pops into his head amuses him, and a slow and limp smile slides onto his lips as if dabbed on by a damp sponge. He feels cold. He decides that he is probably going into shock.

This thought does not unduly upset him. A creeping numbness has taken root in his bones, and it's probably for the best, since Will lazily remembers that he is supposed to be in agony right now.

That thought brings it all back. The drugs. The car. The chair. The scalp.

Will feels his gut twist. And that kiss...

A high, sweet, burning pain begins to worm its way up his nerve endings at the memory, starting at the scar on his abdomen but creeping higher, until his whole chest is a hot, screaming mass of hurt. God, does it hurt, and suddenly Will's face is under his control again, just in time for him to grit his teeth to stop a stream of curses from spilling past his lips.

He must have made some sort of noise because Hannibal is at his side in a heartbeat. "Will? Can you hear me?" He sounds worried, and the part of Will that isn't in agony puzzles over how out-of-character this is, and wonders why Hannibal cares about his well-being so much, after cutting into him with a knife.

Will groans. "What do you care?" he manages to spit through his tight jaw. He tries to curl up on his side, but Hannibal won't let him, pressing Will gently back onto the surface he is resting on.

"Stay still," he instructs Will. "If you move any more, your wounds will reopen, and I will be forced to redress them."

Why does Hannibal want so badly to keep Will balanced on the brink of life? Darkness beckons, tantalizingly close, and Will aches for its release. He has never been the kind to long for death, but suddenly the thought of it sets off an overwhelming longing for peace.

Imagine it. No more pain. No more betrayal. No more daily reminder of his missing piece...

Will finds himself wishing he had succeeded at his leap for freedom over the edge of the bluff.

Hannibal's hand suddenly catches his chin, forcing Will to look him in the eye.

“You are giving up,” he says, matter-of-factly. “You shouldn’t.”

“Why not?” Will demands bitterly, through the pain in his chest that wars with the pain in his heart. “What have I got left to fight for? My wife and step-son hate me, I’m bleeding out in a shitty basement, and the one person who I – who understood me drugged me and tried to kill me. I’ve given life enough chances, Hannibal. I’ve fought long enough. I’m too tired.”

Pain has made him loose-tongued. The words clamour to shove their way up his throat and onto his tongue, tripping over themselves to push their way out, into the open air.

Hannibal has always been able to do this to him.

Cool hands brush over Will’s damp forehead. He is easily soothed, and disgusted by it. Why must they always return to this circle, this action, this very same breath? Why can neither of them move away from the other? Will feels, oddly, with an accompanying swell of an emotion that almost takes his breath away, like a moth batting hopelessly against a lamp. Like a fly trapped in a web.

Like a bird, falling from the nest.

Will wants to die, if only because that way, he won’t have to live with himself, but he won’t have to live without Hannibal Lecter, either.

He is beyond embarrassment when a single tear trickles down his nose.

Hannibal’s deft fingers check his bandages and Will lets his head fall back, mist clouding his vision and fogging up his mind like a cold window. Numbness begins to settle over him again, a blanket of cobwebs, and Will wonders flatly if one can simply run out of emotions.

As his eyes drift shut again, he dimly hears Hannibal say, “I do not expect you to forgive me for all I have done to you, Will. But I implore you to remember to listen to your heart.”

Will always did think that the best instincts came from the heart.

He seems to recall telling Hannibal that once, too.

“You’ve got to do it,” Alana tells him without preamble. Her eyebrows look as though they’ve been drawn on with a ruler, she’s frowning so much. She looks almost on the verge of punching him, so Jack hastily moves to answer.

“Of course I am,” he says, and Alana’s jaw actually drops in shock. “I should have done it from the start, but I never thought...well, you know how Lecter is about Will...”

“How couldn’t you think?” Alana demands. “You were there in Florence. I didn’t see it myself, but you described to Margo and I in rather graphic detail how he drugged you both and tried to cut open Will’s skull with a bone saw...”

“Yes, yes,” Jack says hastily, before Alana can get any louder, “but, well, I somehow never thought he’d actually -”

“Kill him?” Alana supplies helpfully, although her voice is loaded with acid.

“Hannibal Lecter is a dangerous man,” says Jack, trying to avoid saying anything particularly unfortunate. Alana cranks her eyebrows a notch higher. Here, in this hallway, it’s much easier to pretend they never saw Lecter cut those words into Will’s chest with a scalpel.

THIS IS MY DESIGN. How horrifically ironic.

Alana clutches her coffee cup a little tighter. It’s empty now except for cold sludge, but Alana seems to be holding it more for comfort than anything else. “Jack,” she says, and her words are tense. “I’m going to tell you something. And really, I should have told you weeks ago, but Will...he didn’t want it getting around.”

There are chairs in the corridor, so they both sit on them, side by side, like soldier waiting for war. Jack hasn’t sat this close to Alana in months without receiving a scowl from her. It almost reminds him of the golden days of his career, steadily rising through the ranks, with his best profiler by his side and most of forensics intact. Before Lecter. Before the Ripper. These days, he finds it hard to tell the two apart.

“I went to see Will in the hospital,” Alana tells him, twisting her wedding ring around her finger. “The day after you went to get your statement.” She says that word with a certain measure of disgust. “He was off his face on morphine, so I took what he told me with a pinch of salt, but...” She takes a deep breath. “He said that Hannibal Lecter was in love with him. And that he couldn’t help but love him back.”

Jack feels his face freeze with shock. Now that he looks back on it, it seems so obvious, but it still isn’t quite sinking into his brain.

Hannibal Lecter, “Hannibal the Cannibal”, the Chesapeake Ripper...is in love with twitchy, misanthropic, antagonistic Will Graham.

And – and here’s the clincher – Will Graham loves him back.

He suddenly feels that if he weren’t already in a chair, he might have to sit down.

God, it all seems so obvious. The looks. The late-night “therapy sessions”. Dinner. The Ripper’s love notes. The look of abject betrayal from Will as Lecter tried to cut his head open with a saw. The constant requests for a visit whilst Lecter was in prison. And Will’s attempt at throwing them over the cliff...

“Jesus Christ,” he says to himself.

“Will is going to kill me,” Alana says to herself.

Unvoiced between them, is: “If we ever see him again.”

“What I’m saying, Jack,” Alana says at last, “is that you shouldn’t underestimate Hannibal’s attachment. I think he thinks that by doing this, it’ll somehow make Will love him more.”

That gives Jack food for thought. But not for now.

As if perfectly synchronized by forces beyond their control, as one, Alana and Jack rise from their seats and return, like titans, like worn and ancient gods, to Jack’s office.

“Agent Khan,” he says, calm and dignified. “You’re good with computers, yes?”

“Yes, sir,” she replies. Her fingers are clenched tightly together, and Jack reminds himself that although these agents are tough and well-trained, even the hardest of them were shocked by the brutal mutilation witnessed. Careful steps are needed. Not kind ones, but careful. Handle agents too roughly and they’ll break; he learnt that lesson with Will Graham.

So carefully, Jack says, “I want you to find a way to contact Lecter. Tell him we accept his terms.” And, as a ripple runs like the tide around the room, he adds, “And Agent Bell, get your team together. We’re going to need an ambulance.”

Agent Bell nods once and exits the room, several younger agents buzzing at her heels like flies. Agent Khan sits at Ardelia Mapp’s computer, smooths her hijab down, and begins to type.

She’s done in five minutes. “Sir,” she says, trying her best not to look proud, but doing so anyway.

“Anything?” Jack asks. She shakes her head, and they wait, clock ticking impatiently, a little while longer.

In less than fifteen minutes, they get an address.

There’s a bag packed in another car behind the building, but Will doesn’t know that yet, and the rest of the FBI won’t know that until long after Hannibal has gone. Hannibal firmly intends to keep it that way.

Will has settled into a light, uneasy doze, and Hannibal cannot help but feel a twinge of regret at how young Will suddenly looks. He knows it would be unwise to wait here any longer than is necessary, but the point of necessary has not yet passed, and he is content to linger here, by Will's bedside, just a few moments longer.

He brushes a find hand over Will's damp curls. He is pale and slightly feverish, but as yet the wounds Hannibal inflicted show no signs of infection. His breaths are shallow but even, and his eyes twitch restlessly under their lids. Hannibal observes the way the smooth line of Will's jaw – interrupted only by the jagged scar in his cheek – joins flawlessly with the curve of his cheekbone and chin. He really is beautiful. Hannibal has seen Will take care of his appearance, and the results were divine. But he can be content with this alone.

Will stirs uneasily, and Hannibal watches him carefully, but then he quiets, settling down, and Hannibal relaxes.

Will he forgive Hannibal for this? Can he forgive him? Hannibal, for almost the first time in his life, feels abruptly uncertain about Will's reaction. His initial response had not been a favourable one, he admits, but in all fairness, Will had been in shock, and probably did not even remember what he had said. Still, he cannot prevent himself from considering Will's words: "I've given life enough chances, Hannibal. I've fought long enough."

Hopefully, he can convince Will to fight just a little while longer.

Hannibal is a resourceful man, with many contacts and almost as many safe houses, hidden in places the FBI would never think to look. Even if Will makes the decision to part ways with him, once all this is over, Hannibal knows that he can watch him from afar, hidden from view. He imagines it might feel like playing God.

He smiles. He's never been a guardian angel before.

His watch gives a gentle but insistent chime. It's time. He's loathe to leave Will here, in this damp and chilly basement, but he consoles himself with the fact that it won't be long before Jack Crawford and his team arrive.

Hannibal checks Will's bandages one last time, removing the blanket and the socks from Will's feet. Will twitches his head at that, but does not wake. Hannibal reluctantly begins to strap him back into the chair. Under any other conditions he would have desisted altogether, but unfortunately these are unavoidable circumstances, and hopefully Will will not be exposed to the cold long enough to affect his health. That said, at the removal of his barrier against the cold, Will's shivering becomes more pronounced, and his teeth begin to chatter.

"My apologies for this, Will," Hannibal says as he tightens the strap at Will's bare left ankle, although he doubts that Will can hear him. When Hannibal moves to fasten the strap at his waist, Will blearily opens his eyes.

"What's going on?" he manages to ask.

Hannibal finishes fastening the straps. "Uncle Jack will be here soon, Will, and therefore, it is prudent for me to leave."

“Where will you go?”

Hannibal pauses, in the act of picking up the last of any incriminating evidence. He ghosts over to Will’s side and takes a rare peek into Will’s stormy blue eyes, still fogged over with pain. “Somewhere that the FBI cannot hope to find me. But not, I hope, too far away from your beautiful mind.”

Will looks confused, his face tight with pain. Sweat has broken out on his forehead, wrists beginning to strain at the leather straps, and Hannibal, realising that even the best-laid plans can often go astray, reaches into his medical bag and begins to prepare a sterile needle.

“What’s that?” Will says, warily.

“An apology,” says Hannibal evenly. “I’ve caused you enough pain, Will. This is my second step towards making amends.”

He knows that Will, with his boundless curiosity, is already running this over in his mind, but Hannibal doesn’t give him the chance. In one fluid motion, he bares the crook of Will’s elbow and slides the needle in. Will cannot stifle a quiet gasp, but almost immediately he relaxes, his head lolling back against the headrest of the chair. His eyelids droop half-shut, revealing two thin white crescents underneath. His breathing, though a little thready with the remnants of pain, deepens. Hannibal knows, however, that he is still listening, still aware.

“Remember, Will,” he says quietly into Will’s ear, “that your heart will always lead you home.”

A clue. He drops it into Will’s ear like a gift.

“Sleep well, Will,” he says, and before he leaves, he brushes a kiss on the top of Will’s head. Will stirs, but does not wake.

The flak jacket is uncomfortable and Ardelia is beginning to wonder if she picked up the wrong size helmet. It seems to rattle on her head like a metal bowl. She does her best not to fiddle with the gun on her lap (Colt M4 carbine, new), not because she’s afraid of it going off (her fingers are nowhere near the safety), but because she’s afraid that the other agents, all older and far more senior than her, will think she’s nervous.

She is nervous – this is her first time in the field, and to be honest, she’s not entirely sure why Crawford let her go on such a high-status mission. (God. Mission. It makes her feel like she’s in a James Bond movie.) But she’ll take what she can get, and if what she can get is an

uncomfortable flak jacket and a heart murmur from drinking too much coffee, Ardelia'll take it.

Agent Bell, every junior agent's hero, is sat by the door of the van, staring purposely ahead. Ardelia, as the most junior member of the team, is squashed against the grille separating them from the cab. The collar of her shirt is beginning to itch her neck and she wishes with all her heart that she could scratch it. On top of everything, she can feel a trickle of sweat beginning to make its slow and ponderous journey down the small of her back.

This is insane. Here she is, gun in hand, uncomfortable uniform notwithstanding, on her way to rescue her ex-teacher from the hands of the Chesapeake Ripper.

She wonders what must be going through his mind right now.

Of course, no one could usually predict what Will Graham was thinking at any given moment, but after the CCTV footage, after those videos from Hannibal Lecter, Ardelia is beginning to think she's got a pretty good idea of what he must be feeling at this moment in time.

Fear.

God, she doesn't think she'll ever be able scrub out the memory of that look in his eyes when Lecter approached him with the knife, not in a million years. So many layers of pain and betrayal that she couldn't even begin to count them. Ardelia can't believe she ever thought (or hoped) that they'd fall in love. That image, frozen in her mind, of Lecter digging the blade into Graham's chest had erased all thoughts of romance from her mind. Not to mention her doubts about his guilt.

If Graham had truly been in on it, right from the start, there's no way that either man would consent to carving those words into his chest. None whatsoever. And the words: THIS IS MY DESIGN. Ardelia remembers a time when Mr. Graham would say those words to them in class. At the time, they'd seemed revolutionary; later, terrifying. Now, though, they just felt like a cruel joke.

Since Ardelia doesn't have her watch on and there's no clock in the van, she had no idea what time it is. She could ask the agent sitting next to her, a man with stubble probably older than she is, but everyone else is sitting in grim silence, and she really doesn't want to be the one to break it. She also really needs to pee, but figures that it's just nerves. Still, she hopes it passes before they go in. She doesn't want to have to arrest someone while crossing her legs.

Eventually, the smooth road under the van's tyres gives way to a lumpier dirt track, and Ardelia has to fight to stay in her seat. FBI vehicles always have shitty suspension, everyone knows that, but it's still annoying to see that all the older agents somehow manage to stay firmly in place. In fact, Agent Bell doesn't even twitch a muscle.

The van pulls to a halt, but without windows, Ardelia has no idea what to expect. Her anxiety soars astronomically, and she swallows, adjusting her grip on her gun.

Agent Bell gives a brief set of instructions, and Ardelia is listening, she is, but she's almost sick with nerves now, feeling almost claustrophobic trapped in this tiny van, and good god, does she wish that Clarice was here right now.

They switch their helmet torches on and the van doors open; clutching her Colt tightly to her chest, Ardelia scrambles out with the rest.

"Let's fuck this bitch up," she whispers to herself, because that's what Clarice would say if she was here, and the thought makes her feel a little braver.

They search for a door to the basement, because in the video Lecter sent, there was no sign of natural light, and the walls, floor and ceiling (what they could see of it, anyway) was all plain, weeping cement. There's an ambulance parked a little way away from the building – close enough to reach anyone hurt, but far enough away to prevent their paramedics from getting shot in the face.

The thought makes Ardelia shiver, and she hurries along with the rest, checking for dangers.

Agent Bell leads the charge down the basement steps, although it's less of a charge and more of a controlled descent, but Ardelia is a history nerd at heart, and she likes to think that if she'd been alive back then, she would have led the charge of the Light Brigade, with some preferably less disastrous results. The basement smells damp and the walls drip with mould; it's so unlike anything she's ever heard about Hannibal Lecter that she almost has to suppress a snigger.

The room, barren, except for a large dentist's chair in the center, is clear. Agent Bell radios the ambulance for medical assistance and instructs Ardelia to help the first aiders with the pale figure strapped to the chair.

Mr. Graham (still so strange to think of him that way) doesn't seem conscious when she reaches him. It takes a moment for her to realise that it's the first time she's seen him in person in years. And God, does he look terrible. He's awfully pale from blood loss, shock tingeing his lips a pale blue. His face is a mess: cut lip, black eye, the works. The only clothes he has on are a pair of black boxers and a large, pale blue shirt drenched in scarlet blood that seems to be too big for him; the sleeves are rolled up and the buttons are all undone. And she can't help staring at the large white swathe of bandages and gauze, wrapping his whole torso. His head moves loosely across the headrest, and in that moment, he looks younger than she does.

Ardelia can hardly believe that this man used to be her teacher.

When she touches his wrist to unbuckle the strap, his skin is cold as ice. He stirs at that, his eyelids slipping open to reveal vacant windows, pupils blown, confirming what she already knew: he's been drugged.

She says this to the paramedic, who nods and begins to take vitals. Ardelia releases the rest of the straps and somehow, time becomes a blur. She follows the doctors' instructions as they place an oxygen mask over his face and they get him onto a stretcher, and at some point Ardelia realises that Mr. Graham is gripping her hand. He gazes her a little vacantly, a little

distantly, clearly off his face on whatever Lecter gave him. At least, she thinks to herself, he isn't in any pain.

They're in the ambulance now and Mr. Graham has not let go of her hand. She doesn't know what else to do so she lets him hold on, even though his fingers are cold and blood-slick and his short fingernails are beginning to dig into her skin.

Behind the misted oxygen mask, she can see him mouthing something, over and over: a chant, a prayer, an endless litany of thoughts... When the paramedic turns to look for something, Ardelia quickly pulls the oxygen mask away – just the tiniest bit – and leans in to listen.

It's one word, murmured over and over, and somehow it seems oddly fitting with the listless, blown pupils and the slack, calm face of her former teacher.

“Home...” Will Graham whispers, to a vast and uncaring sky he cannot see. “Home... home...”

On a pebbled shore, under stars that are slowly being chased away by the faint, burning dim of the dawn, a man crunches his way towards the docks, where a boat is moored.

This boat has made this trip twice already; once by its previous owner, and once again after the man had it brought back here, under a false name. He has as many false names as he does titles, none of which he particularly likes. The waves lap softly against the shore; the tide is coming in. Perfect.

He is good at many things, and he has always been quick to learn, so the thought of making the journey across the Atlantic does not trouble him. Everything is prepared; all contingencies have been accounted for. No one is watching. He has gone to great lengths to ensure this.

On the boat, he begins to steer it out of the boathouse and into the bay, the wind favourable, the air crisp and cool. Salt tickles his olfactory nerve.

A new life, away across the waves. And, hopefully, an old friend to join him.

Hannibal Lecter looks east, into the rising sun, and smiles at the horizon.

There's an intense feeling of déjà vu in the air that Will is painfully aware of, when he wakes up to Alana Bloom and Jack Crawford at his side. There are differences, though: although both Jack and Alana look dog-tired, neither look in any way suspicious. And rather than being alone, Margot and Morgan, her and Alana's now four-year-old son, are there too, asleep in the corner.

Will intends to say something suitably witty or thoughtful, but as he tries to move, all that comes out is a hiss of pain, that has the unfortunate effect of waking everyone in the room (with the exception of Morgan) up.

"I cannot believe this," Alana tells him. "I'm going to put you on a leash like one of your dogs after this, Will. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Glad we got you back," Jack says. He doesn't mention how he almost didn't agree to Hannibal's terms, but Will knows. He's not an idiot, no matter how much Jack wants him to be.

Molly visits, and they let each other down nicely. It's an amicable parting; neither want a messy divorce, and they split with relief, knowing that they will both remain friends.

Alana visits. Will wisely stays off the morphine this time.

Jack visits, and tries again to get Will at least into a teaching position. Will doesn't even try to be polite this time, and flatly refuses. Jack leaves with his tail between his legs.

Most surprising, perhaps, is the visit from Ardelia Mapp. Will remembers teaching her and her friend, Clarice Starling, almost five years ago. They're both junior agents, now. His clearest memory of Ardelia is of her attempting to persuade him to give Hannibal Lecter a tin of Valentine's cupcakes in front of his entire class, so he's not exactly thrilled when the nurse announces her as a visitor, but he seems to recall that she was on the ambulance with him on the journey to the hospital and decides to give her a chance.

The door opens and Ardelia edges into the room, looking surprisingly nervous. Maybe it's just circumstances, but Will seems to remember her being much more confident when she was a student. Maybe it's the stress of being an agent; perhaps it's just as well Will never made the final cut. His mental health would never have stood up under so much pressure.

"Hi," he says, as she takes a seat. Her dark skin flushes.

"Hi, Mr. Graham," she says, seeming suddenly very interested in her knees.

“How’s life as a junior agent?” he asks, realising he has nothing better to say. Socializing has never been his strong suit. Ardelia shrugs.

“It’s, um, good. I mean – I’ve only just started. My first mission was your extraction last week, so I’m not exactly, uh, experienced...”

Will is just wondering what the hell the poor girl came in to say, and is beginning to suspect that Jack Crawford put her up to it, when finally, the levee breaks.

“Look,” Ardelia says, suddenly looking Will in the eye. It’s so unexpected that he doesn’t have time to look away from it, and the blast of eye contact is so strong that he feels almost blinded. He’s relieved when her gaze shifts to his bandages, peeking out from underneath his hospital gown.

“Look,” she says again, “I have to admit that in my first year as a student, I thought you were super creepy.”

“Most people do,” Will admits.

“Yeah, well, you don’t exactly help yourself. All that skulking around and talking about murder. Anyway, after the whole Valentine’s day thing, when you made the whole class laugh at me, I kinda took it a bit personally, and yeah, it turned into a bit of a grudge. Y’know, because you were creepy and you had embarrassed me...it’s not hard to think of you as a scapegoat. But then there was that whole thing with everyone thinking you were insane and then Dr. Lecter was suddenly the Chesapeake Ripper...well, me and a whole bunch of other agents thought that you were both in on it or something. And we thought that you should go back to prison. But then he kidnapped you and I realised that there was no way you could be working with him after that, and... I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’m real sorry about that.”

Will can hardly believe his ears. “Uh... thanks. Good to hear that.”

Ardelia shifts. “Yeah, um, I’m sorry about the cupcake thing too. I didn’t really think about it at the time, but I guess it must’ve been embarrassing to you, too.”

He can’t help it. He sniggers.

“What is it?” Ardelia asks, looking afraid to find out.

Will is actually chuckling, and fuck him, it hurts the cuts on his chest, but now he thinks about it, the whole situation is really fucking funny. “It was kinda funny,” he manages to wheeze, and his mirth is catching, because Ardelia starts laughing too.

When she leaves and Will is alone again, he thinks about her change of heart. It’s only then that he realises the true extent of the gift that Hannibal has given him: his innocence.

He breathes a sigh into the smoky corners of the room, and thinks about the last thing Hannibal said to him. “Your heart will always lead you home.” He intends to find out what it means.

But for now, he can bask in his newfound freedom, and watch shitty hospital television until his eyes go square.

Will stares out the window, where he can see the faint shadow of antlers in the golden afternoon light.

“Thank you, Hannibal,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your lovely comments, and for being so patient with me! I'm afraid I had to put it on pause for a bit while I finished my A-Levels and sorted some personal things. This is the penultimate chapter; the one after this is the finale, although I'm possibly planning a brief fic set after this one, since I'm enjoying this one so much. I hope you all like it, think my hands might fall off after writing all this!

Home

Chapter Summary

In which Will puts his affairs in order, visits an old friend, and sets himself free.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Even after he is discharged from the hospital, Will can't stop thinking about what Hannibal said to him.

“Your heart will always lead you home.”

To prove a point, Will goes back to Wolftap. It doesn't really qualify as a home, anymore – it's still dusty, despite the footprints that the FBI trampled through it, and only a few tattered cardboard boxes and broken pieces of furniture remain. Will moves his crap out of Molly's house, after repainting her fence and buying her a bottle of wine, and sets to work cleaning out his cabin in the woods.

He starts with the furniture. The old wardrobe in the upstairs guest room goes to a secondhand shop in the nearest town. He beats the dirt out of the old rug in front of the fireplace and gives it to his neighbor on the other side of the creek, a few miles north. The sofa bed in the front room is a lost cause, and frankly, he wouldn't wish it on anybody – he burns the fabric and wood, and strips out the metal parts for scrap. It's like watching an old friend – or no, not a friend, but an acquaintance – bite the dust. The armchair is relegated to the barn.

Once the furniture is out the way, he makes a move on the rest of the house. Will brandishes insecticide like a grenade, waging war on the roaches and woodworm that have taking root in the foundations of the property. He lays humane traps for rats and mice, and then treks two miles east through the woodland to set them free, far enough away so they won't attempt to take up residency again. He scrubs floors with a vengeance, scouring away any sign that he or Hannibal ever even breathed there. He repaints the guttering, polishes the windows to a shine, repairs the rusted pipes out back. He even replaces the loose tiles on the barn roof, selling all his old motors and the rest of the junk that has accrued there over the years.

Once the surfaces gleam and the house is spotless, Will fills three suitcases with everything he owns and puts the house on the market. It's snatched up surprisingly quickly by an old Asian couple with a passion for birdwatching, and they agree to move in in two weeks' time.

He intends to be far away by then. But first, he has one stop to make.

Initially, Will had thought – rather naïvely – that perhaps the home Hannibal had meant was Wolftrap. When he returned there, he'd searched in vain for some sort of signal or clue. No such luck, although he wasn't surprised to learn that Hannibal had been living on the second floor for weeks before Will arrived. Clearly, Wolftrap was no longer the home Will had once thought it was.

When returning to Molly's place to pick up his stuff, he'd even briefly hunted around there, before admitting to himself that it was unlikely that Hannibal would ever be happy to picture it as Will's home, and indeed, it would have been nearly impossible for him to hide a hint there (although Will is positive that if anyone could manage it, it was Hannibal).

Which leaves only one option.

When Will enters Hannibal's old home in Baltimore again, it's like being punched in the gut. Somehow, despite the dust sheets and the dull, unused surfaces, it seems to exude an ancient grace, like an elegant dowager sweeping into a ballroom in all her creaking, worn finery. Faded grandeur that is not lost on Will, who can feel the clench of memories squeeze him tight around his ribs, like a vice.

Although he stops in the doorway as a thousand memories of a thousand past Hannibals vie for attention, he walks quickly through the hallway into the rest of the house, avoiding the dining room, entering the kitchen. The sudden pain in his abdomen is unexpected, but he supposes it was inevitable. Will clutches at a granite surface for support, his hand immediately going to his scar, expecting to feel blood seeping through at any moment.

It doesn't come. Will staggers to the refrigerator, where the surface of it is still shiny and chrome, barely touched by dust, and lifts up his shirt with pale, shaking hands. There's the scar; thick and white, still puckered shut and sealing away his insides, as it should be.

Then, as they always are, his eyes are drawn inexorably up to the thinner, newer lines of pink:

THIS
IS
MY
DESIGN

Although they've healed well, better than he could've hoped, they're still there – a constant reminder of the damage Hannibal's wrought on his skin... and the unfathomable gift Will received in return for it.

Will realises that somehow – between healing, cleaning, and plain just ignoring it – he has forgiven Hannibal.

The thought should shock him. Somehow, though, it doesn't. Perhaps it's just been lurking there, under the surface, like the smooth sharp fin of a shark.

He searches the kitchen. Not haphazardly, but carefully, respectfully. Most of Hannibal's kitchenware is still in an evidence locker in Quantico, and there it'll probably stay for the next decade. The plates remain. Will snoops around the cupboards and then carefully replaces

the china. The tea towels are neatly folded, which he has to stifle a snigger at. His breathing has evened out now, the panic attack that had been on the rise has calmed, as if Hannibal's ghostly presence has poured oil over troubled waters.

It would help more if he even knew what he was looking for. But nothing seems to be out of the ordinary. His search bears no fruition, and so it is with some relief that Will leaves the kitchen, and some trepidation that he inches down the hall toward the library, where Hannibal conducted his therapy sessions.

Will feels as though the floor should squeak under his mass, should creak with the weight of his neurosis. But, of course, they don't. The polished wood floors are as impeccably made as Hannibal himself, and Hannibal Lecter has never bent, even under the most immense of pressures. Still, Will catches himself creeping towards the edge of the corridor rather than down the center. Hannibal is everywhere in this house, even at Will's very shoulder.

The doorknob of the library is brass, and somehow it takes Will more than a second to notice that it's shiny – too shiny. Someone has used it recently. He knows without a doubt who it was.

Blood feeling ready to freeze in his veins, heart pumping so hard it's almost bursting, Will reaches his hand out, slowly, as if in a dream, and inches open the door.

The familiar room takes his breath away.

Dust covers hang like ballgowns from every surface, but it still feels like Will has taken a step into the past. He can still see impressions of his past self, sat in the chair across from Hannibal; can still hear the words "And how does that make you feel, Will?" drifting through the air. His throat is clogging up with emotion.

God, it's too much. Too much happened here and Will doesn't think he can cope with the sudden influx of memories, swirling like a snowstorm inside his brain. There's a knife in his guts and a needle in his arm and a light in his face – count the flashes, Will, I want you to draw a clock for me, Will, have you been losing time, Will, how does that make you feel, Will...

"Shut up!" he shouts, and in the deafening silence that follows he realises that he is entirely alone in here. He lowers his hands from his ears, wincing as his fingernails pull free from his scalp.

He takes a seat. Not his usual one, he sits in the one across. He puts himself in the shoes of Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

And that's when he sees it. The paper, tucked into the frame of the other chair. It's only visible from this precise spot, and Will realises that Hannibal must have known that Will would choose to sit here, in the therapist's seat, in Hannibal's seat. He knew that Will would sit here. Hannibal had thought of this as Will's home.

Will hesitates. Then, with trembling fingers, he reaches forward and plucks up the letter like a leaf, turning the heavy cream paper over to read his name, Will Graham, across the front in a

perfect, elegant hand.

Inside, the message is an address, brief and to the point:

Rue de la Motte
85390 Mouilleron-en-Pareds
France

All trace of nerves gone, Will folds the note thoughtfully.

Perhaps it's time he took a holiday.

"You're what?" Jack says, aghast.

"I'm leaving," Will says, simply. "I should have done it before, really. I'm starting to wonder why I didn't do it sooner."

"But – are you coming back? Is this a holiday?"

Will shrugs. "I may drop by for Christmas."

"Yes, but still – France?"

"I'll write if you want me to."

"Can't I at least get an address?"

"You can have my postbox number."

Jack sinks back into his chair, wiping his forehead. His response had, Will admits, been entirely unsurprising. "But why?" he asks. Will takes the seat on the other side of the desk.

"I can't keep living here, Jack," he says. "Every corner I drive down, every step I take... it's just another reminder. I don't want to come back here. Not now. Perhaps not ever. Maybe I'd have come to visit Beverly, but..."

Jack winces. A cruel reminder of what they'd both lost.

“I’ll come back to visit. Maybe even stay with Alana and Margot, if they’ll have me. Molly and Walter, too. But for now, I need a new life. New people. New world.”

A clink tells him that Jack is pouring something not quite regulation into his coffee.

“Well,” he says, weakly, “I don’t suppose you’d reconsider my offer of consultant?”

It takes almost all of Will’s composure not to laugh right in his face.

“No,” he tells him, firmly. “No. It’s time for me to go.”

They shake hands, say their goodbyes, and Will crosses him off the list. Only one more to go.

“Well,” Alana says, reasonably, “we didn’t expect you to stay here much longer.”

There it is again, that “we”. Margot has heard it a hundred times, and probably again a hundred times more, but there’s something so satisfying about it, so coupley, that she can’t help but feel a slight surge of pleasure from it. They’re a unit, her and Alana – they’re a team. They work together perfectly, in tandem, in unison.

“Gravy?” she asks the table, and starts pouring, anyway.

They’ve sat down for Sunday lunch. It was Margot’s idea, actually – from dreading family meals with her brother she’s now learned to love them, with Alana and their son, Morgan. She can’t cook at all, if she’s being honest, and she knows that neither can Will. Fortunately, Alana is at least halfway decent, and both Margot and Will functioned as her galley-slaves for a while, until Will pleaded a headache and then spent an hour in the bathroom.

She knows he didn’t really have a headache. Despite what her brother wanted to believe, Margot is very intelligent – more intelligent than she lets on in polite company. She knows that Will used to help Hannibal cook.

Maybe, in time, he can learn to love it again, the way Margot has with family dinners.

“How long is it for?” Alana asks Will, who doesn’t quite look her in the eye.

“I’m not sure,” he admits. “Maybe a year. Maybe ten years. I need a break, if I’m honest. The scenery isn’t helping things.”

Margot understands. She'd have sold the Verger estate in a heartbeat if it hadn't have meant the loss of the verger fortune along with it.

"Where are you moving to?" Margot chips in, to keep the conversation going. Not that it was lagging, but a bit of extra tinder never hurt any flame.

"A house in the Vendee, in France," Will says. "It's a big property – a couple of windmills come with it, too. Might get a dog."

"Or two," Alana says.

"Or three," Margot adds.

They laugh. Actually laugh. These three people, broken beyond repair at the hands of men, have managed to repair themselves, piece by weathered piece. Maybe there's hope for them all, yet.

As Margot lies in bed that night with Alana, her wife, the love of her life, she whispers to her, "Do you know, I think he's getting better."

"Hmmm." Alana looks thoughtful. "Do you know, I think you're right."

"Whatever will you do, without Will Graham to worry about?"

Alana pokes her side, playfully. "I guess I'll have to worry about you, instead."

Margot's about to make some kind of cheeky remark, but it gets lost when Alana kisses her, and damn, she'll never work out where Alana got that good at using tongue, because it sure as hell wasn't from Margot, and...

God, life is good. Life is so, so good.

As Margot lies in her wife's arms, she realises that Will's wounds are healing. Not just the scars on his skin, but the scars on his heart, too.

Maybe Will Graham can finally be at peace.

Will's not a huge fan of planes. He likes the water, sure, but on boats he's alone and doesn't have to interact with anybody, and can at least get up and walk around, stretch his legs. He's flying economy, and his stiff muscles are very loudly reminding him of it.

Yeah, this is why he hates flying.

Half of the plane is full of Brits, flying back to London after sight-seeing in Washington DC. The other half are Americans, flying to London to go sight-seeing around England. Will wonders if he's the only non-tourist on the plane. Certainly, he's the quietest. There's a kid kicking his heels into the back of Will's seat (economy: you reap what you sow), and the lady next to him will not stop telling anyone who will listen (including him, even though he's blatantly not listening) about how she swears Donald Trump is a highly intelligent android. Honestly, Will is sure that even a Roomba has enough intelligence to pretend to be Donald Trump, but he's not about to say so, since he's pretty sure that most of the passengers in his immediate surroundings are right-wing. He does not particularly want to be brutally murdered before they even touch down.

Will puts his earbuds back in and tries to block out the noise. It's a seven-hour flight from DC to London, and there's still four of them to go. Despite the din, though, he passes out somewhere over the Atlantic, and doesn't wake up until they're flying over Wales.

The first thought he has is how much greener the UK looks. Maybe it's because he's looking down on it, but he swears there's far less concrete and way more trees. It takes only forty minutes to fly from Wales to London, which is the entire width of the country. Will is too busy marveling at how small it is to notice the stewardess asking them to put up their trays for landing, and flushes when she prompts, "Sir? Your tray?"

"Sorry," Will mutters, pushing it upright. The stewardess, satisfied, continues down the aisle.

He takes a taxi from Heathrow to London Waterloo, rather than brave the underground. The train takes two hours to take him from London to Southampton Airport Parkway, and by the time he arrives, it's well past midnight. He knows he could have taken the flight straight to Paris, but that meant an overnight train to La Roche-sur-Yon, in a country he doesn't know, in a language he can't speak. This way, at least, he gets to sight-see a little, get his nerves together, and put off the inevitable.

He could turn around right now. He could. He knows he could. He could do it right now.

But he doesn't.

He checks in at two am, but since his flight doesn't leave until nine in the morning, he sleeps in departures. Will notices that not one of the airport guards have a gun, which makes him feel self-conscious, even though he himself is unarmed. At six am, he changes in the restroom and shaves, although he doesn't bare his chest any further than his collarbones.

The plane he embarks with only thirty other passengers barely looks as if it can limp down the runway, let alone into the sky. Its only two propellers are uncovered, and the ceiling inside is so low Will has to duck his head. He nervously tightens his seatbelt and prays to every deity he knows that this bathtub is airworthy.

When they take off, the plane leaves the runway so fast Will wonders if he left his stomach behind along with it. Then he reminds himself that it's only a one-hour flight to Nantes, and resolves then and there never to fly again.

At Nantes, after reassuring himself his limbs are still intact, Will hires a ridiculously over-priced car and drives down the peage. He drums his fingers against the steering wheel, reminds himself of his terms. He can turn around anytime – no one's forcing him to stay here. He could turn right around at that roundabout over there and no one would think any worse of him for it.

He could. He knows he could. He could do it right now.

But still, he doesn't.

His fingers tighten. His breaths come a little faster. He feels as though he is walking straight into the fox's den.

He gets there, eventually: Mouilleron-en-Pareds, a tiny, obscure French village in the middle of nowhere. His guidebook informs him that it is the birthplace of Clemenceau – a name he has never heard of until today. There is a church in the middle of the village, with peeling bells and interlaced around with a lattice of narrow street that Will can only just squeeze the hire car through. He passes a school, passes children trying to catch a frog in the shallow river that runs right through the town.

At the top of the hill, with a perfect view of the church, is a large, ornate house, like a chateau, built with grey stone with an elegant white trim. Creeping, delicate tendrils of vines swing artfully over the gate. Will knows instantly that this is it. This is the one.

He's here, now. If he's going to leave, it should be now. He's had so many opportunities to turn back and this is the last – he had his chances and just kept on going.

Slowly, like a dreamer, like a sleepwalker, Will pushes open the gate and numbly walks forward, up the stone front path.

Don't forget. Don't forget what you want to say. These are your conditions. Stick to them. You can still turn back, you can still turn back...

The front door opens, and there he is.

He's wearing brown slacks and a stylish white shirt. Even though this is relaxed, for him, he still manages to easily surpass Will, in his grimy, sweaty travelling clothes.

Here, in the bright sunlight of the Vendee, it feels as if they stand in a different universe. It's surreal.

"I have conditions," Will blurts. Hannibal, at the top of the steps, raises an eyebrow.

"Yes?"

"I'm getting a dog," Will says, and wants to kick himself. He's not sticking to the script. If this goes wrong, if Will screws it up...

"Alright," says Hannibal, agreeably. This throws Will momentarily off-kilter.

“And you’re not killing anyone else.” The words are coming faster than he would have liked but he’s started now, and might as well finish. He finds, oddly, that there’s a lump in his throat. “No more murder. No more pain. If you want meat, you can go to the butcher. Apparently the local one is pretty good.”

Hannibal appears to be waiting for something. “Anything else?”

There are tears in Will’s eyes, now, and to his horror he realises that he must be crying. “Just – just don’t -”

“Yes?” Hannibal looks hopeful, now. Tears are falling, thick and fast, down Will’s cheeks, like rain.

“Just don’t leave me,” he manages to say, and Hannibal smiles.

“Never again,” he says firmly, reassuringly, and that’s all Will needs. He drops his coat. He drops all memories of Wolftrap and Jack Crawford, of the Baltimore State Hospital and a scalpel in a dark, cold basement. He drops his shame and inhibitions and the last of his pain and they go sprawling away, down the hill and past his car, and he’s never felt lighter, never felt freer in his life.

Will Graham drops his coat and runs up the steps, into Hannibal Lecter’s waiting arms.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it's finally done.

Thank you so much for sticking to this fic, your comments and kind words kept each and every chapter going. I love being part of this wonderful, beautiful, creative fandom, and writing this fic has been one of the best epics of my life so far. Keep an eye out for any future parts - I'm considering adding to this and making it a series. But for now, this fic, at least, is over. Until another day.

Until then - peace out, lads and ladettes.

-C.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!